DISCIPLE OF THE LICH
OR HOW I WAS CURSED BY THE GODS AND DROPPED INTO THE ABYSS!
WRITTEN BY Nekoko
ILLUSTRATED BY Yoh Hihara
NOVEL 3

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"AWOOOOO!"
POMERA
"Eeek!"
WOL
"Wh-wh-what should Philia do...? Philia's not good with doggies..."
DISCIPLE OF THE LICH
OR HOW I WAS CURSED BY THE GODS AND DROPPED INTO THE ABYSS!
PHILIA

“Fire Magic
Level 20:
Apocalypse.”
“Fire Magic
Level 15:
Agni’s Rage.”
KOTONE
KANATA

"I don't know why someone as terrifying as you appeared out of the blue.
I was going out of my way to settle this peacefully... But know that you are a *bug*."
ALICE

DISCIPLE OF THE LICH

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NOVEL 3

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

Disciple of the Lich: Or How I Was Cursed by the Gods
and Dropped Into the Abyss! Vol. 3
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Illustrations by Yoh Hihara
First published in Japan in 2020 by OVERLAP Inc., Ltd., Tokyo.
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digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
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ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-208-3
Printed in Canada
First Printing: May 2022
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Chapter 1:
Secret of the War God

—1—

“HOLY FIST POMERA, we know this isn’t much…but please accept it.” said the Guild representative, bowing deeply before us.
“K-Kanata… Wh-what should we do?”
Pomera had been building up her self-confidence lately, but the pouches laid out on the table before us were a good reason to stutter. Each one was packed full of gold coins—a small fortune for defeating Lily, daughter of the spider queen called Mother.
Pomera’s face had gone pale, a stark contrast to Philia, who stared at the treasure with sparkling eyes.
“Kanata, Kanata! With this much money, Philia can eat *all* the sweet things!” she said.
It seemed the Guild had a hard time getting together a suitable reward to compensate Pomera’s (or, more
accurately, Philia’s) achievement. With so many adventurers hired to defend against the ragni outbreak, Manaloch just didn’t have the money to reward the unexpected defeat of what they thought was a demon king.
Even so, they managed to scrape together 40 million gold. To top that off, Garnet had given us 10 million in credit to use at the Mithril Wand. That meant we were now worth 50 million gold. I was starting to feel numb to the value.
I snapped out of my daze and noticed that we were drawing quite a bit of attention. Other adventurers in the guild hall were discreetly pointing their fingers at us and whispering to each other. First things first—it was time to load all the money into my magic bag.
“…Was Lily really that powerful?” I asked quietly as I scooped the cash from the table. Even if the Guild *thought* Lily was a demon king, this seemed like a little much.
“They think Lily’s level was over 400… I have no idea what Manaloch would look like now if Philia hadn’t been there…” whispered Pomera as she trembled.
I put a hand to my chin and thought.
Hmm… Level 400, that’s like twice Lovis’s level, fourteen times Octavio’s level. About a quarter of Philia’s. I just don’t get why that’s such a big deal!
I decided to be diplomatic. “She sounds fairly…strong?”
“Do you really think so, Kanata…?” asked Pomera, seeming uneasy as she looked at me.

To be fair, level 400 was barely any different from Evil Priest Notts. Which meant Manaloch had probably been in danger of being destroyed, right? For a country that feared *Lovis*, that sort of made sense.
Either way, it seemed there were all sorts of threats wandering around Locklore that could easily destroy an entire city. I'd accepted that this world was pretty messed up, but it was a miracle that it kept existing at all. That was probably due to Naiarotop and the other gods balancing things for dramatic effect.
"Those miserable pieces of…" I muttered without meaning to.
"Wh-what's wrong, Kanata?" asked Pomera.
"Oh… Nothing, sorry. I was just thinking."
I wondered if there was any way to free this world from the so-called gods. It made me sick to think that tens of thousands of people could be killed at a whim, all in the name of *entertainment*.
"Kanata, Kanata! Philia did a good job too! Buy Philia lots of candy!" Philia tugged at my sleeve.
"…Philia-chan, with this much money, I can build you an entire house made of candy." I needed to stock up on sweets for her, but there were more pressing matters. "There are some things I want to spend some money on right away… Would you mind?"
I looked at Pomera and Philia. This reward wasn't technically mine, and I couldn't just go spending it without their input.
"…I honestly didn't even do anything. I don't have any reason to say no," said Pomera, shaking her head and looking slightly crestfallen.
Her encounter with Lily made her realize her level was still lacking. At just over level 200, it was becoming incredibly easy for her to end up dragged into dangerous situations. If we were going to stick together, I had a responsibility to start raising her level again as soon as possible.
"Kanata can have all the money as long as you buy Philia lots of candy!"
If anyone *deserved* the reward for killing Lily, it was Philia—but it wasn't too hard to imagine what she would do with 40 million gold if left to her own devices.
"Thank you, Philia-chan. I'll pay you back for however much I use."
That started a train of thought. If Lily was worth 40 million gold, it shouldn't be too difficult to make loads of money if we went out looking for opponents of that level. Not much higher though—we wouldn't want to stand out.
"Kanata, what would you like to buy?" asked Pomera, shaking me out of my daydream.
"Things for your leveling, Pomera. I want to mass-produce Blood Ethers of the Gods as soon as possible and get back to killing demons in the Cursed Mirror."
The blood rushed out of Pomera's face.
"N-now that you say it, we did talk about that…didn't we? So, we're going to be doing that again?"
"That's what I planned, but do you hate it that much?"

Pomera clung uneasily to her staff, her mouth set in a firm line.
“P-please help me, Kanata! I understand now that I need to get stronger to stay with you. I’ll do my best!”
“Good! For now, let’s aim to get you to around level 1,000.”
“A th-thousand…?!”
To make the Blood Ethers of the Gods, we needed brains of a high-level demon, adamantine ore, and sap of the spirit tree.
I could get an infinite amount of the brains for free in the Cursed Mirror.
I could create the adamantine ore with alchemy and Philia’s help. We’d made a little of the stuff as an experiment before the ragni crisis, but it was expensive. With the reward and credit at the Mithril Wand, Garnet could get enough of the raw ingredients I needed to actually mass produce adamantine ore.
That left the sap of the spirit tree, but that shouldn’t be too difficult as long as we could make a contract with a high-level spirit. After that, we could summon it whenever we needed to and request that it get a little of the sap for us.
“First, I’d like to buy some catalysts necessary for the spirit contract.”

—2—

AFTER A QUICK SHOPPING TRIP and placing an order with Garnet for adamantine ore materials, we left Manaloch and walked toward a nearby forest.
“Forty million gold sure disappears quick,” said Pomera with a touch of bitterness.
“That’s because you’ve lost all sense of money’s value now that we’re rich,” I said.
“Sounds like the pot calling the kettle black to me.”
The materials for the adamantine ore cost us 30 million gold. That was three times what we’d spent before. Even Garnet would need some time to source that many materials, but I was hoping he’d have at least enough to get us started soon.
The remaining 10 million gold went toward the summoning catalysts and buying Pomera a replacement staff. Pomera’s old staff had been held together with tape and string, and honestly, the gap between her level and her staff’s quality had just become too large. At this point, it was only useful as a big club. She desperately needed something new.
But the replacement they’d found still wasn’t balanced with Pomera’s current level. It might take a while to find something appropriate. For now, we’d have to make do with what was being sold in the city.
As for the summoning catalysts, I poured through the magic books Lunaère gave me to get some idea of what we should buy. We needed items suited to

a spirit that was a high enough level to live in Yggdrasil, but it turned out those were pretty affordable. Sort of.
I'd always been a bit of a perfectionist, and I realized my eyes were only attracted to expensive items. If I was going to make a contract, then I obviously wanted a powerful spirit to form a partnership with. You get what you pay for, right?
And just like that, 40 million gold was gone.
It was my general impression that one gold was approximately equal to one yen. In one day I blew more money than I'd spent in my twenty years in Japan.
"Philia-chan…I'm sorry. I'll pay you back as soon as I can for these expenses…" I said.
"Philia's happy to make money! Philia wants to earn loads more gold!"
I found myself so shamed by her inherent goodness that I couldn't look directly at her. When she first started following me around, I'd worried what I was going to do with her. But it was embarrassing how well she pulled her weight without asking for anything in return. Other than candy.
"…Philia-chan, why don't we go to the bakery again for some cake once we finish the spirit contract?"
"Yay!" Philia waved her hands and danced around giggling. Pomera's leveling might be the biggest priority, but it would probably be good to keep the Sand of Dreams happy.
Location mattered when it came to spirit contracts. If you wanted to call forth a water spirit, you would go to a lake. If you wanted to call forth a stone spirit, you would go deep into the mountains.
The important thing was to do the ceremony in a place with a lot of nature, like a forest. If you did it in a city full of all sorts of man-made things, you'd be more likely to get a low-level spirit out of the deal.
"I'm going to use the Four Gates Ceremony to make contact," I said. Using the Gold Magnet of the Adventuring King I received from Lovis, I checked the cardinal directions. Then I used the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh (still sheathed) to draw corresponding symbols into the dirt.
The Four Gates Ceremony was a straightforward way to summon a spirit that we could bind in a contract. We would place an item at each of the four cardinal directions. Those items were sent to the spirit world and acted as down payment for opening a line of communication. I laid a monster heart on one of the cardinal points and then pieces of valuable ore on two of the others.
"Kanata, you only bought three items. Aren't there Four Gates?" asked Pomera.
"I'm going to use this as the fourth. Makes no sense for it to sit around gathering dust."
I pulled a large crystal from my Dimension Pocket. Inside the plum-colored gem writhed some shadow-like apparition.

“Wh-what is that?” Pomera readied her staff defensively, sensing its wrongness.
“It’s something Mother dropped. It’s probably worth a lot, but…it’s probably *really* unlucky to keep carrying it around, and it’s not something that should be circulating around Locklore.”
Just to be sure I wanted to do this, I consulted the Acacia Memoirs one last time.

MOON OF THE ABYSS
Value Class: Godly
A crystal imbued with evil magic. Formed via alchemy from a mixture of the blood of thirteen powerful demon kings. Fragments of their souls still writhe within the crystal.
It has the power to enable a demon king to control far more monsters than usual, and if embedded in a monster’s body, it encourages dramatic growth.

I didn’t know of any non-evil way to use it, so this seemed like as good of a use as any.
I flipped through one of Lunaère’s magic books to double-check the summoning process. The spirit that appeared would be influenced by the items, location, and magic of the caster performing the ritual—but beyond that it was still fairly random. If I was shooting for a low-level spirit, then my chances of getting exactly the one I wanted was better, but with the high-level magic that I was about to use, it was up to a roll of the dice. After that it depended on the spirit’s personality whether we could just make friends or if I’d need to perform some sort of service to win its favor.
“Okay… I guess I just have to stick my hand in the middle of the sigil and pour magic into it.”
“Kanata…maybe it would be better to not put in too much magic…?” said Pomera.
“It’s fine. According to the book, this ritual only summons spirits who like humans…most of the time,” I said with a smile, but Pomera’s eyebrows only furrowed deeper. Then I concentrated on the ritual. “Uhh, spirit who resides within the earth, lend your strength to this child of man.”
I placed my hand over the center of the magic circle and poured in as much mana as I could. The symbols glowed, and the items I’d prepared for the Four Gates Ceremony disappeared into the light.
And suddenly, there was a beast standing in front of us.
It was easily ten feet tall with beautiful fur the color of the sky. I wanted to stare at it forever. Two fluffy tails wagged in a friendly manner.
“Aw… It’s cute!” Pomera’s eyes had been wide with fear before, but now her cheeks were turning pink.

Just as she was feeling relieved, the beast in front of us opened its mouth to reveal huge fangs. Buckets of drool spilled from its reddish-purple tongue, creating a puddle on the ground. Its golden, predatory eyes opened wide.
“Eeek!” Pomera revised her opinion and hid behind me.
Well, it looked like I’d managed a temporary summoning at least. Next, I needed to win the spirit’s favor and seal the contract. If I couldn’t do that, then I’d just wasted the items I used.
I stared back at the beast in front of me while trying to keep it in check. Theoretically, it was open to negotiation, but it also looked like it would attack if I let my guard down. If things went well, I’d have a fulfilled contract in a few moments. If they went poorly, it might eat me alive.
I needed to know what I was working with, so I took a look using my Status Check.

Race: Wolzottl
Lv: 2164
HP: 7322/7322
MP: 14243/14243

“O-okay… Pomera-san, Philia-chan, step back a little bit. This might get dangerous. Philia-chan, if anything happens, protect Pomera.”
“Do you think something’s going to happen?!” Pomera blanched under Wolzottl’s gaze as the beast stood there panting.
This was the highest-level opponent I’d encountered outside the Mirror since leaving Cocytus—not counting Zolophilia. It was way more powerful than Mother, the real demon king. What had I just gotten myself into? What had I just gotten Pomera into?
“Wh-wh-what should Philia do…? Philia’s not good with doggies…”
Philia had circled around behind Pomera. Perhaps she’d been bitten by a dog before she became the nucleus of Zolophilia, but I wanted her to protect Pomera instead of hiding behind her robe.
Wolzottl growled.
What should I do? Apparently, there are a lot of battle-loving spirits that will only submit to a powerful summoner.
Then again, there were some spirits who were happy with some food from this world or some sort of game. There were others who would only obey a beautiful person. It looked like Wolzottl was a battle-loving type, but I couldn’t go for a preemptive strike without being sure.
“Ph-Philia-chan, a treat… Give it a piece of candy! We’ll try that and see…” I said, but the moment I turned to look back behind me, Wolzottl charged.
Definitely the fighting type!
Wolzottl leapt high off the ground and then dropped straight down at me. The Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh wasn’t an option, since I couldn’t kill Wolzottl and still expect to get the sap of the spirit tree out of the deal. With

no other choice, I stopped Wolzottl with my bare hands as it bore down on me.
“Sluuuurp!”
It licked me! I was horrified by the sensation. Not just the sticky, slobbery feeling—but the terrible pain. It sucked up my mana as it lapped my face.
“Awoooo!” It opened its huge mouth and came in to eat me. I forcefully flung Wolzottl away with my arm. “Aroo?!”
It seemed Wolzottl hadn’t thought it would lose to a human in a contest of brute strength. It rolled defenselessly across the ground for a few yards, then stood up and rushed back at me.
It doesn’t look like it’s going to go down with just a bit of light damage. Maybe I should end this and try another summoning?
Wolzottl rushed past me, then dashed around randomly. Thankfully, it didn’t seem like it was going toward the girls. Even though she was far more powerful than Wolzottl, Philia was trembling as Pomera held her in her arms.
The spirit sped faster and faster as it ran around me gaining speed with each revolution. Suddenly, it flew directly at me, and I ducked to avoid it.
It rushed around me again, looking for an opening in my defenses. I parried its next lunge. Perhaps I should have put a little more force behind my counterattack, but I didn’t know how to deal with a spirit that I still wanted to bind in a contract.
Then, after it made a few more passes, I realized I was being pulled by something. Its two tails were wrapped around my body.
“It got me!” I shouted before Wolzottl dashed off, dragging me behind. Then it flung me into the air. “Gaaah!”
It leapt from the ground, straight up at me. I was still in midair and couldn’t possibly dodge.
I could evade with spacetime magic, but I’d had enough of this. I wasn’t going to pull any more punches. I twisted in the air and kicked Wolzottl square in the head, sending it flying straight back down.
It crashed into the dirt and lay there with its belly exposed. I landed on the ground beside it.
“…Did I hit it too hard?”
Wolzottl was still lying on the ground. Given its level, I was sure it could handle a hit like that… Then it glanced at me and let out a huff like it was expecting something.
Is this a submissive pose?
I carefully moved closer and rubbed its belly.
“Yip, yip, yip!” The high-pitched barks didn’t suit its appearance, but it wriggled about happily on its back.
“Y-you’ve accepted me…right?” I asked Wolzottl.
Wolzottl sat up, its two tails thumping the ground as they wagged. I took that as a yes.
I had a sudden thought and opened the Acacia Memoirs.

WOLZOTTL
Godly Rank
A high-level dog spirit. He is feared by humans as a spirit who rules over death.
He consumes the mana of anyone he licks. In the case of low-level individuals, this may result in the Wolzottl consuming their souls. He loves attention and playing with others, but his power often kills or injures individuals he interacts with. Because of that, he longs for a strong human. He likes playing chase and play-fighting.

Huh. So spirits appear in the Memoirs too. That's handy. In any case, for such a fierce spirit, I'm surprised he loves attention so much.
Back to business. Considering he was a spirit over level 2,000, he should surely be able to bring me sap of the spirit tree. Visions of Blood Ethers danced in my head.
"Y-you did it, Kanata!" said Pomera happily as she came closer. Philia followed her, creeping along in her shadow.
"Pomera-san, it might still be dangerous—"
Before I could finish speaking, Wolzottl bounced in front of Pomera and licked her across her face.
"Woof, woof!"
Pomera didn't seem to understand what just happened. She stood for a slobber-covered moment, then the color drained from her face and she crumpled to the ground.
"C-c-cold… It's c-c-cold…and h-heavy… And s-s-sort of s-s-sad…" She lay where she fell on the ground and wrapped her arms around herself, trembling violently.
"Pomera-san! H-hang, hang on!" I called to her as I crouched next to her. It seemed that a single lick had stolen away most of her mana. Philia looked like she thought the world was ending as she stared at Pomera.
As I explained to Pomera what the Acacia Memoirs had said about Wolzottl, he let out a small whine, and his tails drooped in dejection.

—3—

I LOOKED DOWN AND noticed a blue symbol in the shape of a wolf appear on my arm before melting away. It was proof that I was accepted by the spirit and the contract was complete.
"Looks like we're good to go…" The symbol was no longer visible, but I could feel it branded into the mana in my body. Through that link, Wolzottl would be able to come to me any time I needed him.
With the contract in place, I decided to try negotiating for the last ingredient.

SAP OF THE SPIRIT TREE
Value Rank: A
A drop of sap from Yggdrasil, the World Tree, said to be the source of all spirits.
It has a powerful healing effect and is valued for its alchemical uses.
It can be obtained by making a pact with a high-ranking spirit who has received permission from the Spirit King to reside within the tree.

It was only an A-rank item, so it wasn't the highest hurdle on the list. It was something that any A-rank adventurer should be able to get their hands on if they worked hard. It should be easy for Wolzottl.
"Woof, woof!"
Wolzottl was sitting nicely, his two tails thumping the ground. He seemed… *intelligent*, but would he really understand what I was saying?
"K-Kanata, be careful. He'll steal your soul like he did mine," said Pomera. She stood a ways off, staring at the two of us.
"Oh, come on, Pomera-san, he just took some of your mana. It wasn't that bad…" Or was it?
…No, Wolzottl was definitely a danger to her at her current level if he got overexcited.
"His t-teeth are so big…and scary…" Philia didn't appear to be a dog person. She was still crouched behind Pomera, trembling. I imagined her using the Sand of Dreams to make four copies of Wolzottl to fight him.
"Uuun…" Wolzottl whined at the girls sadly, his tails drooping. It seemed he desperately wanted to become friends with them.
"Um, Wolzottl-san, I was hoping you could help me with something," I said. He looked back at me, then closed his eyes and turned his head away like he was ignoring me.
Wh-what…?
"Wolzottl-san?"
He let out a bored yawn, eyes still closed, and then curled up in a ball on the ground.
Huh, what? What's going on? I wondered. "Um, Wolzottl-san…"
His triangle ears folded down. It was clear he had no intention of listening to what I had to say.
"What did I do wrong?" I asked, turning to Pomera for advice. She fearfully approached with Philia tugging on her sleeve. Pomera's eyebrows knit together, her expression at a loss.
I decided to try buttering him up a bit first. I pet his head, and he let out a small, contented sound but then quickly closed his mouth. His tails wagged gently back and forth, sweeping over the ground, but stopped whenever I looked at them.

It seemed there was something he was unhappy with. He was pouting. I put a hand to my chin in thought, then Pomera suddenly let out an “aha!”
“Maybe it’s how you’re addressing him?”
It was true that it wasn’t until after I’d called him “Wolzottl-san” that he started to pout. Wolzottl was just his species name. I guess that would be like someone calling me Mr. Man. And despite his appearance, he had a friendly and playful personality. He probably didn’t like the formality.
“Wol, I was hoping you could help me with something…”
He raised his head toward me, his mouth opened in a grin, and his tails started wagging furiously again. He looked incredibly happy.
“Woof, woof!”
Wolzottl really is just a big dog, isn’t he?
“I’d like you to bring me sap of the spirit tree from Yggdrasil, can you do that?” I asked.
“Unf,” Wolzottl sat up and nodded.
Ah, he knows exactly what to do. I knew Wolzottl wouldn’t have a problem getting sap of the spirit tree. Good. I’ve finally got all the ingredients for the Blood Ethers.
“Okay, so I’d like you to…” I started, but Wolzottl was staring at me like he wanted something.
Right, he wasn’t going to do it for free. The Acacia Memoirs said you could get it by *trading* with a high-level spirit.
The sap was a fairly valuable item, and I had to pay an equal price to get him to bring me some.
Money…won’t do. A safe bet would probably be food.
This probably warranted more research. The sap was valuable…but what was it *worth*? Garnet didn’t have any sap of the spirit tree, but surely he’d at least seen some. He should be able to tell us how much it would cost.
Besides Garnet, Lunaère would know about it…but I had no idea when I would see her again. I remembered when we met next to Mother’s fallen body. I had to make sure she couldn’t run away the next time I saw her…
With a sigh, I forced myself back to the present.
I thought I’d managed to find the last necessary ingredient, but it looked like it would take a bit more time.
“…Hm?”
Wolzottl had rolled over onto his back and kept glancing over at me. I crouched down and rubbed all over his pale-blue belly.
“Yip, yip, yip!” he cried in happiness.
We played around like that for a good twenty minutes before Wolzottl suddenly stood up. Light surrounded his body, and he disappeared in a flash.
Puzzled, I waited a little while before resummoning him.
He appeared with a large bag gripped in his jaws. He looked at me, dropped the bag on the ground, and then started wagging his tail. Inside the bag was a bucket. Inside the bucket was a viscous fluid.

I checked the Acacia Memoirs—it was sap of the spirit tree!
All he wanted for payment was a belly rub?! I should have a steak ready for next time, at least…

—3—

WITH THE SAP of the spirit tree in hand, we returned to our lodging in Manaloch, City of Magic.
One final chore remained. I went into the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm by myself to get the last ingredient for the Blood Ethers. After killing a few high-level demons, I returned.
“K-Kanata! Are you okay?!” Pomera wrung her hands anxiously when she saw me stumble back out.
“Gah, I got hit. I went after one I shouldn’t have,” I said.
The demons in the Cursed Mirror were tough. *Really* tough. Every once in a while, I’d come across a demon I’d never seen before and whose characteristics I didn’t know. Sometimes, I’d even encounter a demon that surpassed the level of any monster I’d checked before. It wasn’t a place to let my guard down.
“Were you able to get the ingredient you needed?” she asked.
I pulled a huge jar out of my magic bag and wrapped my arms around it. It was packed full of strange, colorful…stuff. Something that looked like an eyeball floated inside. It seemed like it was staring at Pomera.
“When I was gathering the brains, this thing took advantage of the opening and popped out of the corpse. I thought I was going to die,” I replied, pointing to a yellow spiral-shaped brain in the bottle.
“O-oh…oh. Well. I’m just glad you managed to defeat it.” Pomera’s face twitched as she nodded.
“Wooow! Hey, Kanata, do those taste sweet? Do they?” asked Philia, her eyes sparkling.

“Uhhh… I really doubt it.”
“Oh…” Her shoulders slumped. Thinking about it, Japan did have colorful gummy candy, and they probably existed here too. The brains looked sort of like that, maybe?
“Let’s get right to the alchemy experiments,” I said. We had the demon brains, the sap of the spirit tree, and enough raw material to make more adamantine ore. Philia could provide the Mask of the Ruler of Dreams to help us along. Things were finally coming together.
“Space Time Magic Level 18: Dimension Pocket.”
I made a magic circle and stuck my arm in the middle to pull out my cauldron and the items we had picked up from Garnet to act as base ingredients.
“We’re going to make it n-now?! Right here?!” cried Pomera.
“We don’t have anywhere else to do this. It’ll be fine, I’ll use barrier magic like when we were making adamantine ore.”
“But wasn’t it dangerous then too…? Besides, if you use that,” Pomera looked uneasily at the jar of brains, “I feel like things will get even weirder… Are you sure it’s okay? It’s not going to react with something and end with a huge explosion, will it?”
“It won’t explode. Brains don’t explode.”
“No, it’s just… Considering the absurdity of those demons, I don’t think it would be *that* strange if something did happen.”
“It’ll be fine. Just try to relax.” I smiled wryly.
To be fair, the last time we did something like this, I almost blew up the apartment block where we’d been staying. But that was just an accident that happened because I underestimated the Mask of the Ruler of Dreams. I pondered that a person could probably make a perpetually moving motor with the power of that mask. I couldn’t…but Lunaère probably could. It was a catalyst so powerful that wars had been started over it.
Anyway, I’d learned my lesson and wouldn’t be making that mistake twice.
“Philia-chan, can I have a mask?”
“Yep!”
“Pomera-san, can you silence the noise with spirit magic?”
“All right, I guess I’ll become a criminal with you. I’ll go to prison for you, Kanata,” said Pomera as she wiped tears from her eyes.
“Th-this isn’t illegal! Don’t be so dramatic…”
At that moment, there was a violent knock at the door. Pomera and I both jumped and snapped our mouths shut. Philia was the only one who looked excited as she quietly murmured, “A *visitor*?!”
“K-Kanata, what do we do?! You don’t have to kill them! Please let them go!”
“Calm down, Pomera-san! I told you… I mean, look, we’re not doing anything shady! Just clean up everything so they don’t see!”
“If it’s not shady, then why can’t they see…?!”

We weren’t doing anything wrong. We really weren’t. But the Mask of the Ruler of Dreams had thrown the world into massive wars on multiple occasions, and I wouldn’t know how to explain how we got the adamantine ore if we were asked. And high-level demon brains in a jar were sketchy no matter what the context was.
I jumped up and quickly grabbed the jar of demon brains just as the door burst open.
There was a goat mask peering through the open door above a black coat that flowed over heavy armor. The mask was half hanging off the visitor’s face, revealing a pattern of red makeup around tiger-like eyes.
It was Rosemonde.
“Listen, kid, if you’re in here, then answer the friggin’ door when somebody knocks. I took time outta my schedule to come check on you, and I ain’t got all day.”
She looked around the room before fixating on the jar in my hands.
“What…What the hell is that?” she asked with a scowl.
“Th-this is candy. From another country.”
“…It’s disgusting.”
I let out a heavy sigh as I quickly stashed the cauldron and other items in my Dimension Pocket.
“Please don’t burst in like that, Rosemonde-san.”
“Then don’t leave me hanging outside like a chump,” she sneered. “Like I said, I’m busy. But I still came all the way across town to give you a warning. I don’t even get any thanks for it.”
She was pushy and rude…but did she really go out of her way to find out where we lived and come warn us? She might be rough around the edges, but she was one of the few people that I trusted to look out for us.
“…You’re right. I’m sorry. And I’m sorry we weren’t ready to have you as a guest.” I bowed my head.
She stared at me for a few seconds before pressing her hand to her forehead and sighing, “Now you’ve thrown me off my groove…”
“So, what was this warning?”
“The whole demon king mess has been cleaned up, but now we got another storm brewing.”
“A storm brewing?”
“That’s what I just said. But before we get into that, have you kids been up to something?”
I put my hand on my chin. Had we done something *bad*?
It couldn’t be related to the contract with Wolzottl. It was too soon for anyone to have figured out we’d done that.
Had someone figured out we’d been using our apartments for alchemy experiments?
Then I panicked as I thought maybe someone had seen me talking to Lunaère.

“It’s Aries’s Hand,” said Rosemonde, cutting off my anxiety attack before it got going. “She’s real quiet and keeps to herself. She didn’t even show much concern about the demon king. Hard to tell where she is or what she’s doing at any given time. On the surface she’s working with that old fox, Garnet—but she’s not someone you can trust. Yeah, she helped a bit when the city was in danger, but I’m not sure how serious she was about that.”
“I see…”
Aries’s Hand… Kotone Takanashi. She was also a traveler from another world. But I didn’t understand what this had to do with me.
“She’s been asking around about you.” Rosemonde prodded me in the chest with an armored finger. “We don’t see her for months on end, and now she’s sniffing around about you all out in the open. You piss her off?”
“Kotone-san is investigating me…?” Not totally surprising. I got the impression that she also thought we were from the same home world. “I don’t think we have to worry about that.”
I appreciated that Rosemonde had my back, but she was also kind of paranoid. And Pomera said that when Lily attacked the city, Kotone risked her life fighting to save Manaloch. Not to mention that I had a hard time believing someone from Japan would want to hurt me.
“You don’t get it, kid. The Aries’s Hand seriously hates people. In a straight-up fight, you lot would probably win… But she’s got that mysterious ability. Don’t let her get the jump on you,” she said while glancing at Philia. Philia looked back in confusion, which made Rosemonde shudder.
Then she knocked her knuckles on the table and continued. “A-anyway, there’s rumors that she’s acting weird on the down low. I know you’ve got a head full of sunshine and kittens, but don’t let her fool you. She’s a dangerous person. That old fox has her under his thumb, but who knows how long that’ll last. So heads up.”
“…All right. Thank you for the warning. I won’t forget it.” Maybe I should avoid blindly trusting other travelers like me.
Besides, they all had gift skills from the gods. Kotone’s gift skill was the Aries’s Hand, which meant she could use any weapon at full strength, regardless of if it was cursed or had level requirements. It could be an incredibly overpowered skill depending on what weapons she managed to get her hands on. I couldn’t be too relaxed when it came to any traveler with gift skills like that.
But Kotone was clearly incapable of keeping up with Lily, so no matter how high you estimated her level, there was no way she was over 1,000. She was likely just a little higher than Pomera.
“You and that monster over there won’t have a problem, but that’s not the case with Pomera,” said Rosemonde. “If the Aries’s Hand is hostile toward you, you don’t want her trying anything funny with Little Miss Holy Fist.”
“M-me…?” Pomera fidgeted nervously.
I gulped. It was true. If Pomera were fighting on her own, she probably wouldn’t be able to stand on even ground with Kotone.

“Just because *you’re* tough, Kanata, that doesn’t mean you can let your guard down,” said Rosemonde.
“…But she’s stopped adventuring work this past six months, hasn’t she? I didn’t get the impression she was a combative type,” I said.
“That just means she’s cautious and defensive, not innocent. People like that are dangerous. Cowards will do whatever it takes to protect themselves. And the fact that she’s the strongest adventurer in Manaloch means she’s getting special treatment. But right now, I think she’s more scared of Pomera than of you, Kanata.”
“Holy Fist…” murmured Pomera as conflicted emotions crossed her face.
“Hah!” Rosemonde snorted like she suddenly found something amusing.
Pomera stared at her, and she returned to her irritated expression.
During the demon king incident, Philia had used the Sand of Dreams to make a giant arm to crush Lily. It ended up spawning ridiculous rumors that it was Pomera’s actual arm being buffed by a spirit. And the rumors spread and changed with each retelling. That’s how she got stuck with her hated nickname: Holy Fist Pomera.
But Rosemonde had been there when it happened, and since Rosemonde had been flung away by Philia’s summoned arms once before, she probably realized the truth.
Even so, the position of most powerful adventurer in Manaloch had switched from Aries’s Hand Kotone to Holy Fist Pomera. Was Kotone the kind of person to resent that?
When I saw her at the adventurers’ meeting, she’d seemed like an intelligent person, but she also left a cold and emotionless impression. I hadn’t thought she was hostile, but Rosemonde had been in Manaloch for a long time and knew more than we did.
She was right. There was no harm in being careful.
“We’re close to finishing the ethers, we need to resume Pomera-san’s leveling…” I murmured quietly to myself, and Pomera jumped. She looked unable to say anything and clung to her staff. Then I turned to our guest.
“Rosemonde-san, you came to warn us because you were concerned for Pomera-san, weren’t you? Thank you.”
“Concerned for m-me?” Pomera pointed to herself in disbelief.
Rosemonde folded her arms, clicked her tongue, and looked away. “Tsk, wouldn’t be right to leave you hanging. Besides, it’s not just for your sake. It was annoying me so much that I couldn’t focus on my missions.”
Has she got to be prickly about everything?!
Rosemonde kept talking, “It’s not just the thing with Kotone, either. While you kids have been goofing off and not showing your faces at the Guild, there have been some fishy rumors floating around. You’re adventurers. You should want information! That’s half of the job!”
“I’m s-sorry…”
Now that she mentioned it, I did remember she’d said there was a storm brewing…whatever that meant.

“So what are the rumors?” I asked.
“What do I look like, your secretary? Go over to the Guild and listen around for yourself!” said Rosemonde in exasperation.
“R-right, of course… Anyway, thank you. I’ve been dropping the ball lately.” Getting information and networking in the Guild was an important skill that I’d been neglecting.
Rosemonde stared at me for a few seconds, then said, “Yesterday, a suspicious group came to the city. They aren’t registered as adventurers, but they all have weapons. One of ’em apparently looked like a bandit who’s been on some wanted posters,” she said.
Wait, so she’s going to tell us after all? Maybe she just has no confidence that we can fend for ourselves.
She continued, “It’s weird for a bunch of thugs not registered as adventurers to gather in groups like they intentionally want to stand out. Assuming they’re not idiots, the only thing I can think of is they’re trying to cause a panic in the city and are waiting for the right time to do it.”
If those rumors were true, I should be far more cautious of them than of Kotone.
“How high-level was the one that was on the wanted posters? A few hundred?” I asked.
“…No clue, probably level 30 or 40. If there was a guy walking around who looked like a criminal who was over level 50, there’d be way more of an uproar about it.”
“Right…”
That was…odd. I’d thought there’d be a bigger fish among them since they bothered to make their way into a city with an S-rank adventurer. Didn’t sound like that big of a deal to me.
“I just saw you relax, kid! Don’t relax. I kinda had a feeling about it before, but you three have seriously out-of-whack perceptions of the world,” said Rosemonde with a sigh.
“You really think so?” I asked. I’d thought I’d straightened that out recently, but it seemed as if all the time I’d spent in Cocytus still was affecting my outlook.
“M-my perceptions are just fine…” muttered Pomera with a frown.
Rosemonde ignored her and said, “That’s not the end of the bad rumors either. Sounds like something went down at the church in town too.”
“A huge incident…?” I asked.
“Eh, big enough. Listen, there’s this priest in town named Doàr. He’s an excellent white magic user and well connected. He’s got no interest in status or money. It’s a bit trite, but people around town call him a saint. Dunno if I’d go that far…but even I’ve got some respect for Doàr.”
“Did something happen to him?”
Rosemonde nodded. “Apparently an item was found in Manaloch with a horrible curse on it. He tried to break the curse while keeping it quiet. I guess he failed. Part of the church building was destroyed and Doàr’s gone

and locked himself in the part that wasn't. They say he's still shaking in his robes."
"Wh-what happened…?"
"No clue. If the rumor's true, there are all kinds of disasters scattered around town. There wasn't much else to hear about it. I don't know if they're trying to keep a lid on it to prevent people from panicking, but it's a fact that part of Doàr's church was destroyed and the clergy hasn't made a peep about it."
This many dark rumors floating around was definitely out of the ordinary. A group of armed criminals wandering about and looking for an opportunity, an explosion from a curse that couldn't be prevented. There really was some sort of storm brewing in Manaloch.

—4—

POMERA, PHILIA, AND I started our alchemy experiment again as soon as Rosemonde left and we got the door closed.
Unfortunately, it ended in failure.
"I feel like we're still missing something," I said, grumbling as I read one of the books I got from Lunaère.
In the beginning, we were unable to get our hands on the proper ingredients, so I'd planned to use substitutes. Using the Mask of the Ruler of Dreams allowed me to massively increase the transformations that occurred during the alchemy spell. That let me force things into place, but there were so many other things I was improvising.
But with this experiment over, I finally knew what we needed. We didn't even need any high-quality A-rank items. We could probably sort things out without too much trouble if we talked to Garnet.
The problem was the money. I'd already burned through most of our cash on the materials I needed for adamantine ore. Garnet was still tracking those down for us. I didn't want to spend what little money we had left and end up in a bind if we ended up needing some other ingredient later.
"Maybe we could get some extra money by selling off some random Legendary item using Garnet's connections…" I pondered.
Brains of a high-level demon, for example, would probably go for a high price. Thanks to the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm, I could farm as much of that as I wanted. It should have some use outside of making the ethers.
"I think that would cause Garnet trouble…" said Pomera, looking tense.
That was true. I'm sure he'd try to broker them for us…but would he end up with a ton of demon brains he couldn't sell? And how was he going to explain that to his workers?
"Let's just try talking to Garnet first. He could probably buy some of the sap of the spirit tree," I said.

We needed the sap of the spirit tree to mass produce the Blood Ethers of the Gods, so I didn't want to give it all away if I could avoid it. But until we succeeded in a trial, it was pointless to stock up on high-value materials to mass produce the ethers. One step at a time, and if giving Garnet some of the sap got us one step closer, then it would be worth it.
I wasn't certain what side of the line the sap fell on in terms of being something we could treat casually—but being simply A-rank, it was better than the other items I had.
With that, Pomera, Philia, and I went off to the Mithril Wand. We soon found ourselves staring up at the square clock tower atop the building.
Garnet was a busy man. He was also the master of the Adventurers' Guild. I was hoping we'd find him here when I saw someone I recognized in the entrance of the building: a black-haired girl wearing light armor and a light robe. Her expression was blank, her eyes incredibly cold. She almost made me think of a doll. A really scary doll.
I gulped. It was Kotone Takanashi.
Kotone and Garnet seemed quite close, and she'd probably come to see him as well. I hadn't thought I'd run into her so quickly.
"K-Kanata, should we go somewhere else to kill time? We'll run into her if we go in now," said Pomera.
"…It's all right. There's no reason to think that she's got malicious intent. Besides, even if she's got something planned, she's not going to attack me in broad daylight like this. Let's just go in," I said.
If she did come at me, that was fine too. Better to get it over with now. Considering our level difference, she wouldn't be able to keep up with me using her normal physical abilities, though it wouldn't be strange if she had a weapon that let her flip our level difference on its head. I should be on my guard.
"O-okay," said Pomera. She started taking deep breaths.
"Don't get so tense. She might think it's suspicious," I warned.
"Smile, Pomera! Smile!" said Philia, turning a huge grin toward Pomera.
"I'll do what I can…" said Pomera without confidence as she patted her cheeks.
I suddenly found myself staring into Kotone's long-lashed eyes. She blinked and stared back.
"K-Kanata, she saw us. She's staring at you…" Pomera tugged on my sleeve.
Philia smiled and waved, but Kotone completely ignored her. The Sand of Dreams shifted into a pout of disappointment.
I bowed my head slightly. She was a fellow adventurer I'd seen around the Guild. I should at least greet her.
She didn't return the greeting, but she did come straight toward us. Pomera looked panicked as she glanced between me and Kotone.
"Wh-wh-what should we do, Kanata?! I think we should run!"
"…It's fine. Keep walking. She probably just had some business here," I said, and we headed straight into the Mithril Wand.

We passed by Kotone. I bowed my head slightly again. Her expression didn't change at all as she passed without stopping.
Nothing happened. I let out a sigh of relief, which is when Kotone stopped. I tensed and shifted my focus to what was behind me.
"Garnet isn't here. He's at the Adventurers' Guild today and tomorrow," she said.
I stopped and turned back to Kotone. "Oh…thanks for the tip. You're Kotone-san, right? We saw each other at the adventurers' meeting."
Kotone looked at Pomera, then Philia, and then her eyes settled back on me. "Kanata Kanbara. There's something I'd like to talk to you about. There's a private room in the Mithril Wand where we won't be overheard," she said.
What is this about? Some sort of negotiation? Or maybe a trap like Rosemonde said? No, she's probably just wary of me as another traveler and wants to check out my strength and confirm where I'm from. Either way, if she does try to spring a trap, then it'll be a good opportunity to learn what she's thinking.
"All right," I said. "I actually had something I wanted to talk to Garnet about, but if he's busy, that means I don't have any plans for the day. Let's go, Pomera-san, Philia-chan."
Kotone shook her head and held up a hand. "You come alone."
Was this really some kind of negotiation?
If she just wanted to talk about being from another world, then I didn't mind if Pomera and Philia found out. I hadn't gone out of my way to explain to them that I was from another world, but I trusted them. And it looked like Kotone already knew.
"It's better for me if the two of them come along," I said.
"Fine by me if you don't want to talk," said Kotone as she turned away and started walking. Apparently, this offer was take it or leave it.
"Okay. We'll do it your way," I said.
"Follow me." Kotone turned back and looked at me, then she walked into the Mithril Wand.
I looked at Pomera and Philia. "I'll be back in a bit. Go on home without me."
"A-are you sure, Kanata? This is obviously a trap…" said Pomera.
"I'm fine. Philia-chan, you protect Pomera-san for me, okay?"
She puffed up her chest. "Leave it to Philia!"
It wasn't inconceivable that Kotone would pull me away from Pomera only to have some followers of hers attack while I was gone. I steadied my breathing and followed Kotone.

—5—

WE BORROWED a meeting room in the Mithril Wand and sat at one end of a long table, just the two of us. The walls were decorated with majestic

paintings, and cases held decorative pottery and gemstones. Large, artisan-made wooden chairs sat around the table. This room was probably used by Garnet himself in his capacity as the Wand's administrator.
But there really wasn't any need to borrow a room like this. It felt awkward having just two people stuck in the corner of this huge space. Was this normal as an S-rank Adventurer, being able to borrow a room like this?
I waited for Kotone to start talking, but she sat with crossed arms and a closed mouth.
What was this about? Was she testing me somehow? She stared at me with her cold-as-always eyes, like she was sizing me up.
Was she using Status Check? Or perhaps she was planning to buy time to spring a trap on Pomera and Philia. It seemed best if I got the conversation going.
"Don't you think we would've been fine with a room a bit less…this?" I said as I looked at the walls. Magic circles were drawn into the patterns on the wallpaper. As a meeting room in the Mithril Wand, they went all out on preventing eavesdropping.
But was that all? Those magic circles probably had a reinforcing effect as well. A battle could happen in here without affecting the rest of the building. I wondered if Kotone had fighting in mind.
She was silent for a while. Not even an eyebrow moved—her poker face was even better than Lunaère's. I was at a severe disadvantage in terms of negotiation.
"One of Garnet's assistants suggested this room. It seems like Garnet wants me to owe him a favor," she said, finally.
"…I see."
I'd gotten that impression from Garnet as well. It seemed he gave Kotone preferential treatment. That made sense.
"I also want to do everything I can to keep this conversation from being overheard."
"And what is this conversation about? I heard that you've been investigating me. I know you're a traveler from another world too. Is there something about that you want to talk about?"
"Good. That speeds this conversation along. There's something important I need to ask you about."
Something important regarding being from another world? An image of Naiarotop flitted through my mind. Kotone must want to talk about the gods and how we came here. If that were the case, it made sense why she was so thorough about keeping other people out of it. At least this probably meant she didn't want to fight me.
I heard she generally hated people. So if she didn't want to fight, it had to mean there was a problem she couldn't handle alone.
"How long ago did you come here?" asked Kotone.
"Not long. You've probably been here much longer than I have. Is that relevant somehow?"

“I thought that might be the case…” said Kotone as she closed her eyes and crossed her arms. She was silent for a while. She seemed uncertain of what to do, almost like she couldn’t find the words to ask the question she needed to ask.
She must have found her answer because her eyes suddenly opened. Her expression was blank, but her cold eyes were different. There was a fire behind them.
“Do you know the manga magazine *Step*?”
“What…?” I blurted out. “Uh, I do know it, but why do you ask?
I used to read *Step*, the manga magazine. It was published weekly, featured manga in a variety of genres like action and romantic comedy, and its primary audience was boys. It was the most popular manga magazine in Japan, regardless of the readers’ gender or age.
Kotone clenched her fists and pounded the table. She leaned forward into my personal space and I raised my arms, feeling suddenly threatened.
“What about BERUTO?” she asked.
It was the title of a manga. It was set in a near-future setting and was about a trainee ninja named Beruto who fought alongside his friends to protect their country.
“It…it finished. About a year ago,” I said.
Kotone let out a small shriek and leaned even further forward and reached out to tightly grip my shoulders. Her cold facade was crumbling.

“Tell. Me. *Everything*. I came here three years ago,” she said.
“What?!”

***

What followed was a four-hour conversation about manga taking place in the Mithril Wand’s meeting room.
I spent about half of it giving Kotone an overview of what she hadn’t read of BERUTO. Then she asked about every detail, then we naturally transitioned into talking about the characters we liked, and we ended with Kotone grilling me for more manga news.
I glanced at the wall clock—four hours had passed. Pomera was probably worried sick about me. She would never guess that Kotone and I had just been talking. I certainly wouldn’t.
“I wanted to read it all…” said Kotone sadly as she leaned back in her chair.
I was surprised what kind of person Kotone turned out to be, and that Rosemonde had been so far off the mark.
No, it wasn’t Rosemonde’s fault. It was just that there was such a huge difference between what Kotone showed to the world and how she acted in private—up until now I’d only ever seen the cold, severe persona that she presented to the public.
“There isn’t a manga culture in Locklore, is there? I miss it a bit too,” I said with a smile, which made Kotone jump, then lean forward.
“You miss it?” she asked.
“Huh?”
“You miss manga?”
“Well…yeah,” I said hesitantly, wondering where this was going.
She cleared her throat. “I’m actually, you know, um, writing one,” she said. A blush spread across her cheeks.
“Oh, you’re writing a manga?”
“I figured I could start a trend.”
She’s incredible… That must be why she started doing less adventurer work.
“I’m not good at drawing, but…if you want to see…” she said.
“I’d love to.” I smiled, and Kotone smiled slightly back.
We promised to borrow the meeting room in the Mithril Wand to have another secret chat sometime in the future, then left for the day. I wondered when Kotone would introduce manga to this world, but it seemed she wanted to keep it a secret until she felt more confident.
I didn’t expect our talk to take that long, but I had fun discussing our old lives in Japan. It was something I hadn’t been able to do in so long. I never imagined I’d run into someone here who could talk about *Step* with me.
“I don’t want to pry, but you got a gift skill from Naiarotop too?” asked Kotone as she pushed her chair back in place. I smiled awkwardly, thinking this should have been a topic we discussed before talking about manga.

“Actually…I sort of pissed them off. They didn’t give me anything.”
Kotone frowned ever so slightly, then nodded, “Oh…really? That’s why you were the only one who wasn’t there when the spider monsters attacked Manaloch.”
“Well, the thing is—” I started.
“It’s fine. Seems like you already have two reliable companions, but if you ever need help, you can count on me. I might not be as strong as the child with her strange power, but I’ve got some skills. I’d be happy to help someone from home.” Apparently, Kotone already knew about Philia.
For a moment I wondered if that meant I could ask her for a loan, but I shook my head and pushed the thought away. An S-rank adventurer like her would surely have extra money, but that would be asking too much. It was probably better to sell items to Garnet.
“Thanks,” I said. “And if there’s anything I can help you with, I will. We travelers should stick together.”

—6—

AS KANATA was heading to the Mithril Wand in search of ingredients for the Blood Ethers of the Gods, a lone figure observed him from the rooftops. It was, of course, Lunaère.
She stood inside a magic circle drawn on the roof and stared at Kanata and company walking in the distance. This was a barrier spell called Colorless Sign, and it camouflaged whatever was inside. People outside the barrier could still see her, but she would be…*boring*. Even if someone noticed Lunaère standing on the roof, they would subconsciously decide that she was unimportant and find something more interesting to look at.
However, the effects of this spell were greatly influenced by other people’s awareness. For example, it couldn’t hide Lunaère from someone who was actively searching for her. All it did was make her presence less noticeable to people who were already paying attention to other things.
Case in point…
“Hey, Lunaère. Being a stalker again?” said Noble, appearing quietly behind her.
She jumped, surprised that someone spoke to her.
“N-Noble! N-no, I’m simply taking a little walk, and I stand out too much wearing the Impurity Sealing Robe. I wasn’t trying to watch Kanata,” said Lunaère, her face turning red as she made excuses.

“Right. Obviously, you have to take precautions,” said Noble dubiously.
“O-of course. A-anyway, good job finding me. It must have been difficult, as I was concealed by Colorless Sign.”
“Eh, wasn’t that tough. I just had to look for Kanata.”
Lunaère glared at Noble, but she could make no counterargument. His method had actually worked.
“A-anyway, I’m glad you’re unharmed,” said Lunaère. “I haven’t heard from you since you were taken away by that Doàr man. How did you manage to escape?”
“I didn’t want to make a big scene. I planned to act like a normal treasure chest and then run when that corrupt priest guy wasn’t looking, but…uh, that failed.”
“Failed…?”
“Yeeaahh… The corrupt priest caught me raiding his pantry.”
“What in the world were you doing…?” muttered Lunaère in exasperation. If Noble had time to raid the pantry, he should have had plenty of time to give Doàr the slip.
“So anyway, I smashed through the wall and ran,” continued Noble. “That priest turned white as a sheet and collapsed, even wet himself. It felt good! Been a long time since I’ve done actual mimic stuff like that!”
Noble laughed, and Lunaère closed her eyes as she held her head in her hands in frustration.
“Poor man… Though considering how he’s been acting, I suppose he had it coming,” she said, thinking of how excited Doàr had looked when Noble was carried off. He never expected the treasure chest would pillage his kitchen and then bash a hole in the wall.
“Anyway, good thing I found you so quick. Who knows what you’d get up to without my supervision,” said Noble, rocking the lid of his chest in a show of annoyance.
“Don’t go making yourself my caretaker. I’m not the one who makes a habit of doing ridiculous things.”
“Are you…serious?” Noble was dumbstruck.
So far, Lunaère had swung between extremes of joy and misery whenever she thought of Kanata. She threw hissy fits and threatened to go home only to keep stalking Kanata, and she decided she hated Pomera at first sight—even though the two of them had never spoken, she used a high-level spirit to eavesdrop on Kanata’s conversations. She provoked Philia, and she ran away from Kanata barely a few minutes after the two had reunited. The list of her ridiculous actions was endless. If she was really unaware of how ridiculous she’d been acting, Noble needed to watch her closer than ever.
“Don’t worry, Lunaère. I’ll stop you from becoming the world’s greatest threat,” said Noble. In his mind, he could see an image of a humanoid dragon wanted poster with Lunaère’s picture on it.
“Noble…are you making fun of me?” Lunaere began, but she was distracted by the scene playing out below her.

Kanata had just run into Kotone. With tension between them, they went into the Mithril Wand together.
“Hm, so they’re *both* from another world?” said Noble.
“That girl is dangerous. I doubt she has anything good in mind,” said Lunaère.
“I doubt she’d suddenly just attack him though.”
“I hate not being able to hear their conversation. I really should use Medjedross more in the future.”
Medjedross was a high-level spirit that looked like a bird covered by a tablecloth. It could pass through gaps in the fabric of spacetime and hide itself completely. Lunaère was guilty of using the spirit in the past to snoop on Pomera and Kanata’s conversations.
“Don’t you dare!” said Noble.
Lunaère waited for Kanata and Kotone to exit the building. An hour passed. Then two. Then three, and they still didn’t come out.
“N-Noble, I have to go in, don’t I? I have no idea what could be happening to Kanata…” she said pensively.
“Nom nom… Hee hee, you’ve got some nice snacks, you corrupt priesty…” Noble snored softly as he talked in his sleep.
Lunaère looked at him without expression and leveled a finger at him.
“Gravity Bo—”
Noble woke up with a jump.
“Y-you’re gonna give me a heart attack. Don’t scare me like that!”
Four hours had passed since Kanata and Kotone went into the Mithril Wand. Finally, they appeared at the entrance.
“Look, he’s not hurt. That’s good. Right, Lunaère?” said Noble.
Kanata and Kotone seemed to be engaged in fun conversation. They were clearly getting along better than when they first went inside. Noble knew that this was good news that only meant bad news for Lunaère.
She was glaring at Kotone, her eyes emotionless. She turned and stretched a finger toward the Aries’s Hand.
“Calm down! You can’t cast Gravity Bomb!” said Noble, wrapping his tongue around Lunaère’s arm and pulling it down.
“How…*nice* for her,” said Lunaère. “She’s from the *same place* as Kanata. They must have *so much* to talk about, and they know that there are *so few* people in this world who can understand them.” Lunaère sat down within her magic circle, hugged her knees to her chest, and turned her face away.
“I wish I could see the world Kanata came from, but that will never happen.”
“N-no, they just look like they’ve made friends. You don’t have to be so worried…” said Noble.
Lunaère raised her face and bit into the fleshy underside of her finger. The white skin split, and blood ran free.
“…I will observe that girl for a while. I have to discover what her plans are for drawing Kanata in like that,” she resolved.

“Good thing I found you when I did…” sighed Noble.

Chapter 2:
The Cup of Blood

—1—

THE NEXT MORNING, Pomera, Philia, and I went over to the Adventurers' Guild. Kotone had told me that Garnet would be in the Guild today, and I was itching to get the rest of the ingredients I needed for the Blood Ethers.
Pomera had been quiet most of the morning, but it was clear that she had something on her mind. Finally, she asked, "Kanata…what did you talk about with Kotone?"
"Ehh, it wasn't really anything important. We just happen to be from the same place, so we got a bit wrapped up in talking about home."
I hoped she would drop it, but she gave me a suspicious look instead. "A bit wrapped up…? For that long? I was worried sick, you know."
"S-sorry! Well anyway, it seems she's not a bad person…" I remembered Kotone excitedly discussing manga magazines. "I think Rosemonde just misjudged her since she's such a private person."
"It seems you two became much…*closer* in the span of just a day. I trust you that she must not seem that suspicious, but remember what Rosemonde said. It might be dangerous to let your guard down too much," said Pomera with a pout.
To be fair, she had a good reason to be angry—she was left alone and wondering if I'd walked into a trap while I happily socialized all yesterday afternoon.
The problem was that I really couldn't go into detail about what we'd chatted about, since I'd promised to keep the manga a secret. Pomera could tell I was hiding something, and she must have thought it was some sort of world-changing mystery instead of two people bonding over pop culture. She was irritated with me, and there was little I could do to make her happy.
I figured a sincere apology might smooth things over. "I'm sorry… I should have let you know as soon as I realized Kotone-san wasn't an enemy."
"It's not like I'm mad or anything!" huffed Pomera as she picked up her pace to walk past me. "There's no reason for me to be mad!"
Philia looked at Pomera's back as she stalked off. "Pomera's mad."
I took Philia's hand and ran to catch up.
We soon found ourselves reunited at the reception desk in the main guild hall.
"Is Garnet-san here by any chance?" I asked.
"Mr. Garnet? He's a very busy man. Do you have an appointment?" asked the receptionist.
"Oh, right. We should have scheduled something in advance…"

As both the chairman of the Mithril Wand and the master of the Adventurers' Guild, Garnet was essentially the beating heart of Manaloch, and he had little free time. At this rate, it would take forever to sell our excess items and buy the stuff we needed. Perhaps I should have asked Kotone to be our go-between.

"Mr. Garnet is particularly busy today. A royal messenger from the capital is arriving soon, and…" said the worker, but at that moment a large-framed man came down the stairs behind the desk like a bolt of lightning.

There was a thunderous sound as he hit the floor at the bottom of the steps and stopped quickly, surprising the surrounding workers. Garnet scanned his surroundings with narrowed eyes and a scowl, but the moment he spotted me, his face broke into a familiar, warm smile and rushed over like nothing was out of the ordinary.

"Ah, if it isn't Master Kanata and the Holy…" Garnet swallowed the nickname the moment he saw Pomera's scowl, then continued, "Ahem. And *Miss* Pomera and Miss Philia."

Pomera's expression immediately went back to normal, and Garnet quirked an eyebrow as if making a mental note not to repeat that mistake in the future. His interpersonal skills were scarily good.

"H-hello, Garnet-san…" I said.

But before I could continue, he wheeled back to me and said, "I wanted to let you know that I've found a way to get my hands on the large volume of Jade Dragon's Eyes that you requested."

"Sir, don't you have something important coming up…?" asked one of Garnet's embattled secretaries, only to have Garnet's palm thrust toward his face, stopping mere inches in front of his nose.

"I am aware of the time, thank you!" he shouted.

Was this really a good time for us to come?! I wondered, amazed at how quickly Garnet's emotions changed. Then I began backpedaling, "Um, we'd be happy to come back another day—"

"No no no, Kanata," Garnet said soothingly, "Don't you worry, this other thing is not at all important."

I wouldn't have thought a visit from a royal messenger would be so routine, but Garnet ordered a receptionist to lead us into a small office in the back.

"Garnet's beard is so funny!" said Philia, reaching up to grab at it as I desperately tried to swat her hands away.

"Ph-Philia-chan, that is really rude!"

But Garnet lowered his head to make it easier for her to reach. "Ho ho! Why Miss Philia, I might just cut it off and give it to you if you like it so much!"

"…Are you sure we should be taking up Garnet's time?" asked Pomera, looking at me with uncertainty. I didn't feel right taking him away from his duties either, but hopefully we could keep this meeting short.

"Um, Garnet-san… Actually, there are a few additional things I would like to ask you to get. If possible, would you be able to find these?" I asked.

“A-additional things…you say? I-I see…” he stammered, his smile looking somewhat pained.
“…You really are busy, aren’t you?”
“N-no, no! I can get whatever you like, it will just take time! I will put the entire Mithril Wand on it!” declared Garnet loudly, and I thought he was trying to assure himself as much as me.
But what I needed him to get this time weren’t B-rank items like Jade Dragon’s Eyes. I just had a list of measly C-rank items and below. I quickly passed him a slip of paper, saying “This is an overview of what I need…”
His eyes passed over it, and his expression relaxed.
“Good, good, good…” he murmured to himself. “Even without extra time, I should be able to get my hands on these. Most of them should be available in town. I will put my workers on it,” he said, looking utterly relieved. Then his expression clouded over again. “However…needing Jade Dragon’s Eyes in the volume you’ve requested is unprecedented. And given the combination of these ingredients, the situation seems…ominous, to say the least. Kanata, what is it that you are making?”
“I suppose I should tell you, shouldn’t I?” I said, feeling a bit like a kid caught with his hand in a cookie jar.
“No no, it’s not important! Forget I asked,” said Garnet.
I was shocked for a moment. Was he perceptive enough to know what I was doing already, or did he just value discretion and our working relationship?
I paused for a moment, then continued, “A-anyway, I’m a little worried about whether or not we have the money to cover these additional items.”
“Don’t you worry about that, Kanata. The sum of money Miss Pomera received for defeating the demon king was embarrassingly low. A beast of Lily’s level may well have destroyed Manaloch if not for Pomera’s intervention. If that had happened, the royal family would have placed a bounty on Lily’s head in excess of one billion gold.”
“O-one billion?!” I sputtered. I couldn’t believe a level 400 monster could pay out a billion gold. Lily wasn’t even the real demon king! I killed Mother…and now my brain was reeling wondering how much she would have been worth if anyone had known the truth.
“Oh my, yes. As it is, I feel bad enough asking for payment for the Jade Dragon’s Eyes. So please don’t concern yourself about the trifling cost of things on this list,” continued Garnet.
“Was Lily…really that dangerous?” I mumbled to myself, still in shock.
“What was that, Kanata?” asked Garnet.
“N-nothing.”
In any case, I didn’t want to keep forcing more and more work on Garnet because he was being kind. With that in mind, I thought about the sap of the spirit tree. Maybe he would take some of it in trade for the things I asked for, and I wouldn’t feel like such a leech for getting the stuff for free.
Besides paying fair value for the things I needed, I also realized that I didn’t want to be too indebted to Garnet. He was friendly to us…but he was also a

shrewd businessman. I had a feeling that owing him too many favors could come back to haunt us.
“Garnet-san, I brought something along that I thought could help cover the cost. Would you mind assessing it?”
“Hmm…? And what might that be?” asked Garnet.
“Sap of the spirit tree,” I said, and Garnet’s eyes grew round.
“What?! So, the stories that Miss Pomera has a contract with a massive spirit are true?”
A variety of emotions fought for control of Pomera’s face. Surprise was winning, but guilt was still a strong contender. Garnet was most likely talking about the stories from when Philia used the Sand of Dreams to create the First Dragon and defeat the ragni we encountered on the road from Arroburg. Then again, he might well be talking about Wolzottl.
“White magic, martial arts, and now spirit magic too. Dear me, Miss Pomera, I must say, your skills are to be envied by all,” said Garnet with a deep bow.
Pomera tried her best to keep her expression blank and muttered out, “Y-yep…thanks.”
“Is sap of the spirit tree really that valuable?” I asked.
Garnet was struggling to get his hands on the Jade Dragon’s Eyes, which were B-rank items. The sap was an A-rank item, which made me think it should be valuable, but my track record wasn’t the best when assigning gold values to items.
“Yes, yes, of course it is,” said Garnet. “Only a select few of the most powerful spirits reside within the world tree, Yggdrasil. You must of course have a contract with one of them and then negotiate a trade in order to receive sap of the spirit tree. It is an incredibly difficult task. Miss Pomera, to be able to receive sap of the spirit tree at your age… You must be blessed by the spirits. In fact, you must be blessed by the entire world.”
As Garnet spoke, Pomera smiled tightly and said, “…Th-thank you very much.”
Meanwhile, an image of Wolzottl lying on his back and asking for belly rubs kept popping in and out of my mind.
“Sap of the spirit tree has naturally powerful restorative properties,” explained Garnet. “In addition, as the science of alchemy has progressed, it has become increasingly valuable and critical to the advancement of alchemical research. Due to the increased demand, the spirit king decreed that sap of the spirit tree shall not be brought easily to other worlds. Even high-level spirits are unable to bring it out as easily as they did in the past. I would be more than happy to purchase some from you.”
Well, that question was answered. I pulled a satchel from my magic bag. Inside was a portion of the sap of the spirit tree that Wolzottl had brought to me. Using some empty milk bottles I bought at the market, I’d transferred about three-quarters of a gallon of the sap into the glass containers for easy carrying.

“…And what’s this?” asked Garnet, looking confused.
“This, uh, this is it,” I said.
“You mean…?” The wrinkles on his face deepened.
“This is what I was talking about, the sap of the spirit tree.”
“All of it? It’s *all* sap of the spirit tree?”
“Yes.” I nodded, beginning to worry that I’d been bamboozled by a dog spirit.
Garnet looked sternly between me and the bottles, then tumbled from his chair into a heap on the floor.
“Garnet-san! Pull yourself together!” I cried.
“All the liquid in th-th-those bottles is sap of the spirit tree?! I c-can’t believe it!” shouted Garnet as he pointed to the sap with a shaking finger.
“Calm down!” I shouted back. Sap of the spirit tree was something any spirit magic user worth their salt should be able to get their hands on. I didn’t understand why he was losing it so much when he saw the real thing.
“Kanata,” he said after taking a moment to compose himself. “Long ago, I once met a spirit magic user who was in a contract with a spirit over level 100. Even for that worthy magician, it was a struggle to get enough sap of the spirit tree to fill a single cup. And that volume was worth over eight million gold.”
I looked down at the bottle I held in my hands. This was only a fraction of what I’d received for just scratching Wolzottl’s belly.
Garnet continued, “Are you sure it isn’t diluted with something? I understand that is a rude question, but I find it hard to believe that a spirit delivered that much sap when the Spirit King has ordered that it be protected. Miss Pomera…what in the world have you made a contract with?” asked Garnet fearfully.
Lily was only around level 400, and she was considered a threat to the entire country. Wolzottl was over level 2,000—and yet when I thought of the massive dog, all I could envision was vivid blue fur and two wagging tails. Had I gotten us in over our heads without even knowing it?
“M-may I open it and have a look?” asked Garnet.
“Of course,” I replied. “If you need some time to check it. You can hold on to it for a while.”
“It does appear to be the real thing, however…however!” He took a sniff of the jar. “Kanata, the Mithril Wand cannot purchase such a large amount on my decision alone. But, if it is real, the Mithril Wand would want to purchase as much of it as possible. It’s just, this volume is far more than I had expected.”
“I don’t mind selling at below market price, and I’ll be happy if you only purchase what you need,” I said. The amount Wolzottl brought was more than I needed for now. The best outcome for me would be to sell the jars I brought with me in exchange for all the ingredients I was lacking.
“First thing first, would you be kind enough to allow me to hold off on giving you an answer until we have confirmed its authenticity? In the meantime, I

will happily take responsibility for this list of items you need and gather everything for you in exchange," said Garnet.
"I would appreciate it very much," I said.
We were interrupted by a knock on the door.
Garnet turned toward the door and shouted, "What?! I'm in the middle of a very important—"
"Sir, Kotone has arrived! If we don't finish preparations now…"
Garnet looked anxious when he heard Kotone's name, and I wondered if this is what he'd been so busy with today.
"Garnet-san, I'm sorry to have taken up your time. We can see ourselves out," I said.
"I hate to rush things, but…" he replied and then offered his well wishes.
I was surprised to hear Kotone's name though. Was she involved with the royal messenger's business too?
I doubted this was related to manga.

—2—

POMERA, PHILIA, AND I left through the guild hall.
"Um, should we have shown Garnet that?" asked Pomera once we were halfway back to our apartments.
"It's fine. Probably… Well, I'm not entirely certain. But Garnet-san seems like the kind of person who can handle a delicate situation."
Garnet really was incredible. I was sure that he'd picked up on the fact that I was trying to keep a low profile and was doing his best to accommodate me.
Just then, I saw three people wearing blue metal armor with golden patterns on it—two men and one woman. They looked a bit strange for adventurers, mostly because of the matching outfits.
"Who are those people?" I asked.
"I've heard of that blue armor," said Pomera with tension in her voice. "They're Royal Knights, the country's greatest fighting force."
They were a bit more than the simple messengers I'd imagined. If they were the country's elite warriors, did that mean their levels would match their reputation? If these were the people charged with keeping the country safe from humanoid dragons and demon kings, then they should be far stronger than run-of-the-mill adventurers.
"But why are they in Manaloch?" I asked.
"Really, why are *we* acting as delivery people?" sighed a male knight with green bobbed hair, who seemed to be thinking the same thing. "Why have we been assigned such a worthless task?"
The other male knight, a huge man with a missing eye who was probably around forty years old, replied, "It's just a precaution. His Majesty is the

worrying type, and we follow our orders no matter how worthless we think they are."
"I heard that Manaloch was the most developed city after the capital, but is this *really* all there is to it?" huffed the female knight with violet hair. "Half the reason I came on this mission was to sightsee, but this is a waste of time."
The country's greatest fighting force or not, they seemed pretty stuck-up to me.
"It's probably best if we don't get involved with them," I said quietly, and Pomera nodded.
Unfortunately, someone near us had other ideas.
"Watch your mouth!" shouted a man in flamboyant red robes as he moved closer to the trio. "Nobody talks bad about our city, and I don't care if you are Royal Knights! I don't see what's so great about you anyway!"
The people of Manaloch loved their hometown and could be arrogant and cold to outsiders. There were only a few cities this large in the country—and they were proud of that.
The one-eyed knight shrugged in annoyance, but the violet-haired woman flashed her canines in a laugh and moved forward.
"So…what adventurer rank are you?" she asked.
"Tsk, I'm C-rank, but what's that got to do with anything?" asked the red-robed man.
In a flash, the woman stepped forward and kicked the red-robed man in the jaw, knocking him to the ground. Then she stepped on his head where he'd fallen, pressing his face into the sidewalk. Drawing her sword, she held it to his neck.
"In the capital, you'd be nothing more than a D-rank failure. Maybe it's a good thing you were born in Manaloch," she said before pulling her sword away and lifting her foot.
The red-robed man crawled away from her with a groan, before standing to run shakily away. The knight cackled as she watched him go.
"You dropped your staff! Moron!" She stomped her foot down, shattering the crystal set in its head.
These *really* weren't the kind of people I wanted to get involved with. Anyone willing to draw their weapons on a crowded street to settle some petty dispute was someone I wanted to avoid. Granted, only the female knight had been violent, but her companions certainly hadn't done anything to stop her.
"Philia hates those people," said Philia, puffing up her cheeks and starting toward them, but I quickly grabbed her hand.
"Philia-chan, when you don't like someone, you should just stay away from them," I said quietly.
"I thought the Adventurers' Guild was around here somewhere, but I don't see it. Bennet, you've been here before, haven't you?" said the one-eyed knight, and the knight with the bobbed haircut—Bennetbennet—shrugged.

“That was just a quick mission a long time ago.”
I pulled Philia’s arm to get out of there as quickly as possible, but then Bennet pointed at us.
“Hey, you, lead us to the Adventurers’ Guild.”
I hung my head. We failed to escape.
“I am so terribly sorry, but we have a very urgent matter to take care of,” I said, trying to come up with a quick excuse to get out of there. “If you head in that direction, you should see it right away. It’s the large building with all the adventurers gathered around it…”
“Well, we have an even more urgent matter. We’re acting on behalf of the king himself. On whose orders are in you in such a rush?” asked Bennet as his eyes narrowed in a glare.
“…Let us show you the way,” I said. It seemed like the fastest way to get rid of them would be to give them what they wanted.
“See, I knew you’d get your priorities straight,” said Bennet as he patted my shoulder twice. I forced a smile, while Philia glared at him. “You got a problem, missy? I’ve got to tell you, I can be pretty immature. I don’t think I’d be above putting you in your place.”
Bennet smiled faintly as he brought his face close to Philia’s.
Philia turned red and went to raise her arms. Pomera and I both turned pale and tried to hold her back.
“St-stop, Philia-chan! Please! I’m begging you!” I hissed.
“L-L-Listen to Kanata! I’ll buy you some candy later!” chimed in Pomera.
The Royal Knights might be powerful, but Philia was over level 3,000. If she let loose, there might not be much of Manaloch left.
“Hah, I’ll let you off the hook this once if you do as your big brother says. Now, come on, we don’t have all day,” said Bennet, unaware that he’d just come within a few seconds of certain death.
With a brisk step, we led the three knights toward the Adventurers’ Guild.
“You lot, you’re adventurers, right? What rank?” asked Bennet as we guided the knights.
“Just C-rank,” I replied, and Bennet grinned while shooting a glance at the one-eyed man.
“Hah, people like you can make it to C-rank? No wonder Manaloch is hopeless.”
“…Kanata, can we stop holding Philia back?” whispered Pomera with a frown.
“It’ll be over soon enough,” I whispered back.
The Guild came into view. Bennet looked up and muttered, “Ah, there it is. Right. We’re done with you now.”
He waved us away dismissively, offensive to the very end. But at least we managed to end the encounter without incident.
Just then, a seedy-looking man ran by and crashed into the one-eyed knight. The knight immediately guarded with his sheathed sword and directed the man toward the ground. The man fell backward.

“How dare you? What’s got you in such a rush, hmm?” asked the one-eyed knight as he pressed the man down against the cobblestones. I sighed because it looked like things were going to end in a fight at the very last moment.
Suddenly, a woman who was walking nearby lunged to plunge a knife into the one-eyed knight’s back. It took me a second to realize what was happening as the knight groaned in pain and then turned to bludgeon the woman with his scabbard.
There was a scream, and the townspeople started running away while dozens of armed thugs circled around us.
“Sh-she got me!” roared the one-eyed knight as he fell to his knees. “They distracted me and then stabbed me with a poisoned knife!”
“Hey…hey! Y-you just aren’t listening, are you, Manaloch!” Bennet grimaced as he shouted, but his casual arrogance didn’t sound nearly as confident now.
“It’s fine. At least this makes this mission interesting,” said the violet-haired knight with a bloodthirsty smile as she drew her sword.
“K-Kanata, what’s happening…?” asked Pomera as she scanned the area in confusion.
“Looks like they’re after the knights,” I said. I tried to think back to the warning we received from Rosemonde the day before.
What did she say? …Something about a suspicious group in the city. All armed but none are registered as adventurers. One looked like a bandit on wanted posters. Trying to cause a panic in the city and just looking for the right time to do it.
It seemed the knights were their target. That meant this was a much bigger deal than even Rosemonde had imagined. The suspicious people she’d spotted must have been just a tiny portion of a larger group.
“Summoning Magic Level 8: Flare Dragon!”
Atop the Adventurer’s Guild stood a man with neat red hair—his face was covered in bandages with lifeless eyes peering out—and behind him a dragon with fiery red scales appeared from a magic circle. It was over sixty feet long with whiskers and a mane, making it look more like an Asian dragon than a European one.
“What the?! That’s Dogma the Fire Dragon! He’s got an A-rank warrant on his head!” shouted Bennet as he glared at the man.
“Ha ha ha! Now, my good knights, let’s play!” The man leapt up onto the flare dragon’s head, and the beast flew straight at us, its mouth open as it belched forth a mass of flaming spheres. The balls of fire blew gaps in the cobblestones wherever they landed.
“Gwah!” The one-eyed knight was flung back by the concussive force.
“Urgh! You’re a goner if you take a direct hit! I’ve got to strike the main body as quick as possible!” shouted Bennet as he narrowly dodged a flaming sphere and moved to attack.

I stood in front of Pomera and Philia, swatting away flaming spheres with my bare hands. They weren't magic, so they weren't affected by the anti-magic defense effect of Lunaère's Robe—but they weren't that powerful, either.
You weren't going to summon a particularly powerful spirit with only an eighth-level spell. They were probably level 100, max.
"Incredible, Kanata…" said Pomera.
"Pomera-san, let's support the knights!" I said. I couldn't stand the three of them, but I wasn't about to let them face their doom at the hands of some bandits, either. I just hoped this wouldn't call too much attention to myself.
Two men came at us, one from the front and the other from the rear. It was a good move on their part, but they weren't high enough level to be fast enough. I karate-chopped them both in the chin, and they collapsed on the street, unconscious.
"Fire Magic Level 7: Fireflies!" cried Pomera.
Orbs of fire appeared in the air around Pomera and crashed to the ground. The blast ripped up more cobblestones and sent nearby attackers flying backward.
"Wh-who the hell are you…?" said the one-eyed knight, staring at us in disbelief from where he lay on the ground.
"Tsk!" The violet-haired knight landed near us. She looked like she'd been hit by the enemies' blades. Her armor was charred from the flare dragon's fireballs, and fresh wounds ran across her skin.
They're not much better than A-rank adventurers...
The violet-haired knight crouched and took a magic bag off the one-eyed knight.
"I'll take care of this," she said.
"It's in your hands now… I think I'm…done for…" he said.
After that, she slipped between the enemies and ran. Whatever was in that bag must have been what the thugs were after.
"H-help! Somebodyyy!" screamed Bennet.
I looked in his direction to see the dragon holding Bennet in its mouth as it dragged him along the ground.
"Hah ha ha! Don't disappoint me, my dear knights! A-hah! Try and stop me if you can!"
Then the flare dragon was coming at me, straight on.
I saw Bennet's crying face and realized a magic attack might hit him as well.
I drew the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh and stepped to one side to slash at the flare dragon as it passed. It split, the slice across its neck burning away from the sword's magic. The dragon's head crashed to the ground with a growling roar.
It groaned in pain as its body was surrounded in light and dissolved away. I gathered Bennet in my left arm and swept him to safety before letting him drop to the ground.

“Hah…ha ha…hah,” came a weak laugh from behind me. Dogma lay on the ground, flung off his seat on the flare dragon’s back. His arms and legs were bent in unnatural directions.
“Y-you’re…way too…strong…” he said, then his eyes rolled back in his head, and he lost consciousness.
I didn’t know what was going on, but I knew we had ended this attack.

—3—

“WHITE MAGIC LEVEL 4: HEAL.” Pomera tended the wounds of the one-eyed knight and Bennet. “Are you…all right?”
Both Bennet and the one-eyed knight had taken some bad hits. Their physical wounds had been healed, but they were still trying to wrap their heads around what had happened.
“Wh-what kind of C-rank adventurer faces off with a high-level spirit and attacks it…” murmured Bennet while looking at Dogma, who was still unconscious.
The one-eyed knight was listless—he was conscious and his life wasn’t in danger, but the poisoned knife must have sapped quite a lot of his energy.
“But I’ll have you know, an enemy as weak as that wouldn’t stand a chance against us if they fought fair and square,” Bennet continued. “We were just taken off guard by a surprise attack, and the battle didn’t go our way. I’ll admit you’ve got a bit of skill yourself, but they were focused on us and that let you get in some cheap shots. That, and we prioritized securing the item over gaining control over the enemy.”
“Huh, right…” said Pomera.
“What’s with that attitude?!”
“You can’t even give a simple thank you?” Pomera stared at Bennet with a look of exasperation.
Bennet looked at the collapsed enemies and clicked his tongue. “Tsk, based on this, I bet info on this mission was leaked a long time ago. Dogma the Fire Dragon is one of the head honchos of the Cup of Blood.”
That must have been the name of the group that tried to take whatever the knights were bringing from the capital.
The fact that the knights were attacked in broad daylight right before they could hand over their package to the Guild meant this group didn’t think much of the elite Royal Knights. If we hadn’t been there, they’d have been wiped out.
“It’s good we managed to fight them off without things getting too bad, though,” said Bennet as if they had been the ones to carry the fight. “Quite a feat to finish off the Fire Dragon Dogma when he was leading a surprise attack. That’s making good luck out of bad. We have to meet up with Noelle as soon as possible.”
I assumed that was the name of the violet-haired knight.

“Kanata…we’re so close to the Guild, but no adventurers came out here as reinforcements,” said Pomera with an uneasy frown. Suddenly, a wall on the second floor of the Guild collapsed and the glass in the front windows shattered. There appeared to be a fight going on inside.
“The attack’s still happening!” shouted Bennet.
Then a scream came from a different direction entirely. It wasn’t just the Guild—the Cup of Blood was attacking all of Manaloch. But if their target was the item the knights were carrying, there was no need to attack the entire city.
Regardless, their execution was perfect—this wasn’t the act of some amateur street gang. Did they have another target besides the item the knights carried?
“I-Impossible… The Cup of Blood is spread out throughout the entire kingdom. But this scale…” mumbled Bennet, struggling to take it all in.
“They’ve got to have all their members gathered in Manaloch. If that’s the case, who knows how many villains in the same class as the Fire Dragon Dogma are wandering the streets? Maybe even their leader, Big Arm Bosgin!”
I’d never heard of any of these people, but the Cup of Blood sounded like a pretty dangerous organization. Manaloch was in serious trouble.
“…Pomera-san, let’s split up. You go with Philia-chan, heal the severely wounded and fight off the attackers where you can,” I said.
We could prevent more damage if we spread out. I was worried because we hadn’t started leveling Pomera again yet, but even so, she should still be one of the strongest people in Manaloch.
“A-all right!” she replied with a nod.
Kotone was in the Adventurers’ Guild. I was worried about her too, but she was S-rank and could take care of herself. I needed to patrol other areas.
I was about to run off when Bennet grabbed onto my leg. “W-wait, you C-rank adventurer!”
I reacted too late and stumbled, my momentum dragged Bennet across the ground and sent him rolling.
“Gah! Ah!”
“S-sorry! That wasn’t intentional!” I said. I rushed to his side and helped him up.
“With the way things are going, I’m getting worried about Noelle. She took the magic bag and ran. You have to help us!”
I looked away from him and went to leave. He latched onto my leg again.
“Wait wait wait! C-come on, I’m begging you! And I’m a knight!”
“You three aren’t my responsibility,” I said.
“B-but it’ll be really bad if that criminal organization gets their hands on the item we brought!”
“Really bad…?”

Bennet's eyes narrowed, he looked serious. "Yeah. I'll never live it down. My parents will disown me, and I'll lose my inheritance. Even though I'm the eldest son!"
Is he messing with me?
I turned to leave in disgust, but Bennet wrapped his arms around my waist and wouldn't let go.
"I-I-I'm sorry! Help me! Please help! The Red Staff of Authority is the kind of thing that could cause horrible damage if used for evil!"
I thought for a moment. It was true that I was somewhat worried about the item, and right now I wanted information more than anything. I didn't know much about these people who were attacking.
"All right. Let's go find Noelle. We'll stick together until we find her," I said.
"J-just until we meet up with her? What about after that?! Even if we run from Manaloch, Big Arm Bosgin could come chasing after us! Please, reconsider!"
How could this person look down on everyone so much when he's this much of a coward?
"I'll make my decision then," I said.
"G-good compromise! Don't have much choice, I'll accept your conditions."
I sighed, wondering how long I'd have to stick with Bennet. If possible, I wanted to get as much information as I could, then go our separate ways.
"The Red Staff of Authority… It's the item the royal family ordered us to bring to Manaloch to give it to the Aries's Hand," explained Bennet.
He went on to say that the Red Staff of Authority was an item that used to belong to a traveler from another world. The owner was one of the Four Heroes who destroyed the Nightmare Rites, a group of five high-level demon kings that existed over three thousand years ago.
However, the staff's nature meant you couldn't use its power unless you formed a contract with the powerful spirit sealed within the staff.
"Aries's Hand has a skill that lets her ignore an item's conditions for equipping it. Some of the alchemists at the Royal Institute even think she might be able to draw out more of its power than the traveler from the legends. They decided to bestow this item on the Aries's Hand as a countermeasure against monster disasters."
"I see…" That would be why Kotone was called to the Guild. Now things were starting to make sense. In a world where countries could be destroyed by monster disasters, a trump card like Kotone could be more powerful than any army. "But if she's the only one who can use it, then it's not that dangerous if the bad guys get their hands on it, right?"
I mean, what would they actually do with the Red Staff of Authority if they got it? On top of that, it wasn't even certain how well Kotone would be able to use it. True, the knights might lose a potentially powerful weapon, so you could say that was a big problem—but it didn't seem like it would immediately turn into a crisis.
"What are you saying, you idiotic C-rank adventurer! I'll be ruined!"

“Bennet-san, maybe you should have stayed behind.”
Bennet was proving to be dead weight, and he didn’t have much information to make it worth my time. I could move much faster on my own.
“Th-that’s not all of it! It’s strange that the Cup of Blood prepared this seriously for their attack!” said Bennet.
“Go on.”
“L-Look, if they can’t use the Red Staff, it’s just an expensive decoration. I mean, it has *value*, but it’s too weak a motive to bring together all of the Cup of Blood in one place. They’re normally scattered across the entire kingdom. The Cup of Blood are bandits, but they’re not your average thugs. They’ve got multiple members who could rival A-rank adventurers.”
A-rank adventurers did have a fair amount of power in Locklore. People with that kind of strength would never be short of money as long as they didn’t blow it all. They could pick and choose whatever jobs they wanted. Giving that up to be a bandit was a choice that said a lot about the Cup of Blood.
“Particularly their leader, Big Arm Bosgin,” Bennet continued. “There are only a handful of people in the kingdom who are higher level than him. He rivals even an S-rank adventurer. If we knew he was coming, we’d have brought the entire force of Royal Knights. If he’s here, Manaloch’s finished.”
I gulped. I’d been thinking that Pomera shouldn’t have too hard a fight so long as it was against someone along the lines of an A-rank adventurer. Bosgin might be too dangerous for her.
I should have been more cautious. The way things were going, I thought I might end up fighting someone as strong as me, if not stronger.
“A combination of Big Arm Bosgin and the Cup of Blood organization could be considered a humanoid dragon,” said Bennet.
I let out a sigh of relief. If Notts counted as a humanoid dragon, and Bosgin needed his entire crew to be that powerful, then I had nothing to worry about.
“Are you taking this seriously?” asked Bennet, his brow furrowed.
“Anyway… I don’t know why Big Arm Bosgin is so focused on the Red Staff of Authority. I doubt the leader of a bandit organization is obsessed with history. Even if he sold it to some rich person in some other country, it’s still nothing more than a decoration. There’s only so much money he could get out of it.”
Considering he’d have to divide that prize with the dozens of underlings he brought with him, it didn’t seem like a very profitable plan.
“So, in other words, you think he found a use for the Red Staff?” I asked.
Bennet shrugged. “It’s not impossible. Besides, that item’s been stored in the treasury for ages. We can’t even anticipate what kind of damage the Red Staff of Authority would cause if used for evil. It could level the entire kingdom.”

There were too many unknowns. Considering the worst-case scenario, we couldn't take the Red Staff of Authority lightly. Bennet might be a jerk, but I decided we should prioritize getting it back.
On top of that, if Bosgin was aiming to get the Red Staff, we would likely run into him as well. I wanted to take him out as quickly as possible to limit the damage.
"And think of me! If this thing turns into a huge disaster, it won't just be me who'll end up ruined! My family will be dragged into it too! Don't you understand?!" Bennet pleaded, looking desperate.
"I get it…I don't really care though. Please just stop talking about it," I said.
"This is serious! My family have been Royal Knights for generations! If I fail, even my father could be chased out of the knights! This is an abnormal situation, but if the worst happens, they're not going to consider that. We have to protect the Red Staff of Authority, no matter what!"
I wondered if I could find someone else to take Bennet off my hands along the way.

—4—

WE FOUND OURSELVES engaged with a group of Cup of Blood bandits in an alleyway. Bennet was locked sword-to-sword with one of the bandits.
"Not too bad for a criminal, but that's all you are!" said Bennet.
They continued to exchange blows until Bennet plunged his sword toward his opponent's heart. The man couldn't react fast enough, and Bennet dealt a fatal wound.
"Right, who's next?" he asked as he turned toward me.
"I've already handled it, Bennet-san," I said, as the other six Cup of Blood warriors collapsed around me.
"Uh… Oh, all right…" Bennet lowered his sword in confusion. "Guess they weren't that strong, huh."
"Let's hurry, Bennet-san. Noelle and the Red Staff might be in danger, right?"
"Right…" Bennet swung his sword, flinging the blood from it, and then slid it back into its sheath. "Kanata, was it? Why are you only a C-rank adventurer? You want me to put a good word in for you with management?"
"No, I just want to take it slow."
"Uh, sure…" said Bennet, then he frowned and looked at a building. "I just heard Noelle scream on the other side! Let's go around!"
"Wind Magic Level 3: Fluegel," I said, and a magic circle surrounded me, lifting me upward. I grabbed Bennet's shoulders and pushed off from the ground, launching us onto a nearby roof. Bennet stumbled on landing and almost fell over, but I kept him upright.
"Are you okay?" I asked.

“A-a warning would be nice! I’m glad for a shortcut, but I wasn’t ready for that!”
I turned toward the other side of the building to see an open square. In the center was Noelle tied to some wooden planks, her arms stretched so she formed a cross shape.
“N-Noelle!” shouted Bennet. She appeared to be breathing, but no life showed on her face, and her violet hair hung limply. Her wrists and neck were wrapped with thorny vines.
In front of her stood two people—a man and a woman. The man was shirtless and carried a massive axe with a peculiar purple gleam. He wore a black cloth over his head, with cutouts for his eyes.
The woman had black hair and was wrapped entirely in bandages. She was tall—nearly six and a half feet—and wore a simple black dress of the sort a woman might wear to a funeral, along with a wide-brimmed, dark-colored hat.
“That’s Bahar the Executioner and Healis the Thorn Witch! Either one of them would be a match for an A-rank adventurer!” said Bennet, turning pale.
“They’re famous?” I asked.
“They’re ruthless killers. The two of them combined have killed more than a thousand people. I didn’t think they were the kind of villains to associate with an organization, so I’m surprised to see them working with the Cup of Blood. Bahar’s particularly bad, we’ve lost two Royal Knights to him. His axe uses a rare poisonous metal and was originally an artifact belonging to another country. A tiny scratch can be enough to kill you.”
“Ahh, so you know of my Hydra, the Violet Dragon Axe?” said Bahar, looking up at us and laughing from behind his mask. “I had a feeling some other knights would come if I tortured their friend here. I hate being looked down on, so get off the rooftop and come down here and fight me, little one.”
Bahar readied his axe to strike Noelle. Bennet scowled in anger.
“Hey, Kanata, don’t you think it’s perfect? Two against two? You take Healis, I’ll take Bahar. I’ve got a bone to pick with him,” he said.
“I don’t mind, but—”
“Be careful. Healis has had both white and death magic used on her. They say she’s turned into some kind of monster under all those bandages. She’ll probably move in for close combat, since she can take the hits and try to trap you with her thorny vines…but she’s sure to have some other ace up her sleeve. Sorry to make you take care of her, she could be the most dangerous opponent in the Cup of Blood. If things go badly, just keep your distance and hold out. I’ll come help as soon as I can.”
“Thanks for the warning.”
“Hey hey, you make it sound like I’m not all that much of a threat,” bellowed Bahar, tapping his axe on the ground. “Get down here and I’ll show you both the true meaning of hell.”

I stepped forward and leapt down from the roof.
“H-hey, time it with me, idiot! They’ll both come at you now!” Bennet shouted, rushing after me.
“You think I’d waste any effort against a weak opponent?” said Bahar, sneering at Bennet’s words.
I landed. Healis, who had been standing still until now, came at me. The aura she gave off was less like a human’s and more like the ones of the monsters I’d fought in Cocytus. I noticed her fingers were oddly long and her skin below the bandages was a dark crimson shade.
“Earth Magic Level 6: Malice Thorn!” said Healis in a hoarse voice.
Countless black thorny vines stretched from her fingers toward me.
“Kanata! Didn’t I say to keep your distance?!” shouted Bennet.
Whatever.
Lunaère’s Robe had complete resistance to any spell of tenth level or lower. The black vines shriveled and died the moment they touched me.
Healis was shaken and stopped.
“Are you a moron or what? Only an idiot kid like you would leave yourself open. Make no mistake boy, this is a fight to the death,” said Bahar as he swung his axe at me from behind.
I grabbed the withered black vines and pulled, swinging myself around. The vines pulled Healis with them, and I used her body to block the incoming axe.
“Gah!” The blade of Bahar’s axe sank into Healis’s back.
“What…?”
I followed with a light kick to the side of Bahar’s head while he struggled to remove his weapon. The force of the kick sent him flying, and he dropped his axe before crashing straight through a stone engraved with the image of a dragon. The rest of the wall collapsed onto him a moment later.
Bennet ran to a stop behind me. He looked at Bahar, then Healis, his face expressionless.
Since Bennet had just said Healis was tough, I was expecting her to get up from that, but I guess she wasn’t *that* tough. The poison on the Violet Dragon Axe that could kill with just a scratch was in fact working very well.
“Sorry, didn’t mean to steal your kill. It’s not a problem though, is it?” I asked as I turned back to Bennet. He looked back and forth between Bahar and Healis for a while, dumbfounded, then back at me.
He pursed his lips and then stuttered out, “K-Kanata…do you want to be a knight?”
“No, but I appreciate the offer.”
After that, we managed to get Noelle off the planks. Her injuries were extreme, but she would probably live if we could get her to safety. Bennet made Noelle drink a potion that brought her back to consciousness.
“U-urgh…B-Bennet?”
“I’m glad you made it. The enemy’s all over the place, and I came as fast as I could. I was worried sick,” he said.

“Thank you… You saved me.”
“Well… *I* didn’t actually do that much,” added Bennet in a low voice.
“Anyway, where’s the Red Staff?”
“It’s…gone. A man who looked like Bosgin took it along with the magic bag…” said Noelle weakly. Bennet sank to the ground.
“N-no… I-It’s all over… I’m sorry, Father…”
Well, this looked like this was turning into an annoying situation. The leader of the Cup of Blood already had the Red Staff of Authority. He’d achieved his goal and I wouldn’t be surprised if he had already left Manaloch.
Bennet turned to me with a pleading look in his eye. “K-Kanata! Please help me get the Red Staff back! We’re friends now, right? We can chase after Bosgin! If both of us fight, we can probably manage even against an enemy like him!”
“Friends is kind of a stretch…” I said.
“I-I’m sorry for being rude before! But please!”
“I can’t leave Manaloch in the state it’s in right now. Besides, we aren’t even certain we’ll find the staff if we leave Manaloch, and I owe a lot of people here. We’re going to have to go our separate ways now,” I suggested, and Bennet’s shoulders slumped in disappointment.
“Yeah…you’re right. I have to get Noelle somewhere safe, and it seems like members of the Cup of Blood are still in the city.”
But had Bosgin really run? Bennet himself had said there was something strange about this. There were too many unknowns surrounding the Cup of Blood’s attack. Depending on their true motive, Bosgin could still be in Manaloch.

Chapter 3:
Reaper's Attack

—1—

"WHITE MAGIC LEVEL 7: Healing Rain!"

Pomera waved her staff, and a gentle white light filled the area around the entrance of the Adventurer's Guild. The wounded who had been gathered there felt the pain leave their bodies as their injuries healed. Cries of praise and joy went up.

"A-amazing, a white magic spell at such a large scale!"

"Thank you, Pomera!"

"Holy Fist Pomera!"

"Once the nickname sticks, it doesn't go away, does it…" said Pomera, her eyes narrowing with chagrin.

There was an explosion in the distance. Pomera looked to see a building collapse there.

"Th-the scale of the attack is just too large… What are they really after?" she wondered.

Bennet had implied that the attackers were seeking the item the knights were transporting, but if that were the case, then why not just attempt a simple snatch-and-grab? A coordinated attack on this scale only made Pomera think they were trying to wipe Manaloch itself off the map.

"Philia, let's go toward that explosion," said Pomera.

From that direction came a small child, half-dragging, half-carrying their blood-soaked parent toward Pomera.

"M-miss, please… My mama is… Please heal Mama! Please!"

The child stumbled, and an adult nearby lent a hand in lowering the mother to the ground. The child bowed to Pomera while crying.

"A-all right, I'll take care of it!" Pomera ran over to them and noticed some scattered stragglers coming down the road toward her from where the explosion had occurred. Apparently, people had heard this was a safe place and were coming to find her.

If she moved, she would be abandoning them. But that last explosion was a bad omen—it was in a different direction from the one Kanata went in. Things would get bad if they didn't do anything.

"Philia, please. Go toward that sound," said Pomera.

"But Pomera's in danger. Philia has to protect Pomera," said Philia uncertainly.

"I'll be all right. I'm not as strong as you, but I've gotten stronger thanks to Kanata. So please…"

"No. Something bad will come here. Philia has a bad feeling." Philia was still young and innocent, but she sometimes showed a certain wisdom. Philia was probably right, something bad was likely to happen nearby.

“Thank you, Philia, but I think we can save far more people if we go separate ways. Trust me. Please go, Philia,” said Pomera as she smiled gently. Philia still seemed uneasy, but she nodded.
“Okay. Philia will be sad if something bad happens to Pomera, so make sure she’s okay. Run if danger comes.”
Philia ran off toward the directions of the explosion, looked back once, and then quickly disappeared.
“Thank you, Philia,” murmured Pomera. She then looked at the people around her and called in a loud voice, “Anyone with injuries, gather around me for healing!”
After that, Pomera set up a station inside the Adventurers’ Guild and continuously cast white magic for a while, but the injured just kept coming in a never-ending stream.
“Healing Rain!”
“Y-you’ve cast it at least ten times since I’ve been watching! A white magic spell of that size too! Are you all right? You must be close to running out of magic…” asked one of the townspeople. Pomera felt a little lightheaded and put a hand to the wall to keep from falling over.
“P-Pomera!”
“I’m okay. I can do more!” she said, squeezing her hands into fists. “Just give me a moment.”
But suddenly, Pomera sensed a cold hostility. By instinct, she raised her staff and retreated backward as a woman wearing a kimono appeared in front of her, swinging a katana. The blade swept through Pomera’s hair and a few golden strands danced through the air as they were sliced off.
“Huh,” said the kimono-wearing woman as she stared at Pomera while the townsfolk screamed. “You managed to easily evade a surprise attack from me, even when strengthened by Zephyr’s Wing.”
“Earth Magic Level 4: Clod Missile!” A pudgy man wearing goggles stood outside the window, and a clump of dirt crashed through, flying straight toward Pomera.
Pomera knew of Clod Missile—it was a spell Rosemonde had used. The clod of dirt would explode when it made impact. And if it exploded here, the injured citizens of Manaloch would suffer even more.
Pomera had to stop it. But if she wasn’t careful how she moved, the kimono-wearing woman would likely follow up with another attack.
“Spirit Magic Level 6: Fox Fire!” Pomera raised her staff, and a magic circle appeared. A ball of flame, about the size of a person’s head, appeared between Pomera and the incoming attack. Fox Fire swallowed the Clod Missile, preventing an explosion, and Pomera quickly moved so the orb was between her and the woman.
Pomera readied her staff, keeping an eye out for the next attack. Then a magic circle appeared in the middle of the floor, and a man appeared inside.

He wore a black robe and had black hair, giving him a sinister air. He was young, but his eyes were cruel with dark circles beneath them. He clapped slowly.
“Simply incredible. I couldn’t believe it when I heard there was an adventurer here more powerful than Aries’s Hand. But it seems the rumors were true. You easily handled Yozakura and Damia’s combined attack.”
“You’re with the Cup of Blood, aren’t you?!” asked Pomera.
“Please don’t lump us in with that riffraff. I imagine the name Lovis of the Black Reapers will ring a bell for you, Hero Pomera? No, we’re not with the Cup of Blood…but we couldn’t stand by and let them have all the fun, either.”
Lovis stared at Pomera like he was evaluating her, then smiled coldly as Damia climbed through the broken window and entered the Guild. The chubby magician fell in line behind Lovis and alongside Yozakura.
“Th-three murderers!”
“You’re not alone, Holy Fist! We’ll help you take them!” The healed adventurers picked up their weapons and stepped forward.
“People like you are trying to stand against people like us? I don’t care about small fry when I have a true hero in front of me. But if you’re going to get in my way, you’re going to die,” said Lovis.
Yozakura stepped forward and the adventurers stopped warily. One careless movement and the entire place would turn into a battlefield.
As if just to break the tension, a wall came crashing down. Outside stood a massive man, nearly ten feet tall, holding a giant club. He wore no shirt, but his skin was a dark silvery gray, and his face was hidden behind a steel mask.
In front of him stood a slender, tidy man wearing a blue tuxedo and a top hat. The eyes below his top hat were narrowed into crescents as he smiled disconcertingly.
“Ah, Lovis, my good man. Are you certain you three can handle Holy Fist Pomera? There are rumors she is even more skilled than Aries’s Hand. We shall support you,” he said.
Pomera gulped as she looked at the strange pair.
“Laun and Paige, the Mystery Brothers. Sorry, this is a rare opportunity. A group fight would ruin all the fun. Could you two interlopers see yourselves out?” said Lovis.
“Oh, you shouldn’t treat us so unkindly,” said the top-hatted man. “Laun and I are not the most patient of people—particularly as you are not members of the Cup of Blood. If you speak ill of us again, my hand may just slip in the heat of battle. Ha ha, besides, you’ll make an enemy of Bosgin if you don’t cooperate.”
Lovis sighed, closed his eyes, and shrugged. “Yes, I understand. I suppose I have no choice.”
“It’s a good thing you’re so intelligent, Lovis. Now then—”

“Damia, Yozakura, separate the heads from the shoulders of those two idiots,” said Lovis as he opened his eyes, a cruel smile on his face.
“Lovis, stop with these empty threats of yours. The Black Reapers don’t have the strength needed to take on the entirety of the Cup of—”
Damia turned an arm, covered with a thick leather glove, toward Paige. There was a smile below his goggles.
“Yessir! Clod Missile, coming up!” A clump of dirt flew toward Paige and Laun.
“Wha—!”
Laun stepped in front of Paige, taking the Clod Missile’s explosion with his lead-colored body.
“U-uwa!”
A cry of anger echoed from behind Laun’s steel mask.
“G-good defense, brother! Have you lost your minds, fools?! You’ve just violated the truce! The Black Reapers won’t get out of this alive!” shouted Paige, his voice ragged. As the dust from the Clod Missile cleared, Paige scanned the area. Right in front of him was Yozakura, her hand on her sheathed katana.
“Spirit Magic Level 5: Ogre’s Strike.”
Light surrounded her, filling her with physical strength. Using a high-speed attack style favored by samurai in her homeland of the Yamato Kingdom, Yozakura borrowed the power of the spirits to charge her strike.
“W—!”
Before Paige could cry out, Yozakura drew her sword and struck in the same fluid motion, cleaving through Laun’s body.
“Gah, gwaaaaagh!” Laun’s scream filled the Guild as his massive body fell to the ground.
“I-Impossible! Even the Royal Knights couldn’t cut through my brother’s steel skin! How could you do that in one strike?!” shouted Paige.
Lovis immediately moved behind Paige and brought the blade of his scythe to the man’s neck.
“Ah! A-all right! I’ll make sure Bosgin understands everything!” said Paige.
Lovis leaned over and looked Paige in the face. “Paige, you must remember that I’m not like you. I don’t make empty threats. When I say I’m going to kill someone, I kill them.”
Lovis pulled his scythe and sliced Paige’s head off. With the same swing, he brought the scythe down to remove Laun’s head as he lay on the ground. The two heads rolled across the floor.
“Well, hopefully you can remember that for your *next* life, anyway,” said Lovis.
“Boss, you know this’ll make us more enemies,” said Damia like he was just chatting.
“The message needed to be sent, Damia. Maybe now that coward Bosgin will come at me to save face. That should make things more fun, but I don’t have high expectations for him.”

“I feel better now,” said Yozakura with a thin smile. “I couldn’t stand those Cup of Blood fools. We needed this. I was worried that you’d lost your spine after that…*incident*, sir.”
The Manaloch adventurers—Pomera included—couldn’t wrap their heads around the violence they’d just seen. They all stood frozen in place until Pomera shouted, “W-weren’t they on your side? How…? How could you kill someone that easily?!”
“How like a hero to say something so ignorant,” snorted Lovis. “You simply don’t understand, Hero Pomera. We humans are *meant* to kill each other easily. Peace and stability are all fanciful dreams. *Unachievable* dreams. Animals are made to gain pleasure from struggle. An animal that just lives in peace…well, it might as well already be dead.”
Lovis raised his scythe. “I created the Black Reapers for the sole purpose of fighting strong opponents with no one getting in my way. They are the opening act to my headliner. The Cup of Blood’s attack was merely a lure to bring me a worthy enemy. And those two idiots got in the way of my primary goal…so they had to die. Do you understand now?”
“Your selfishness goes too far! Attacking a peaceful city just because you personally enjoy fighting!” said Pomera.
“And how selfish are you for avoiding fights just because you prefer to live in peace? Killing is life, for me.”
Pomera gulped and held her staff at the ready toward Lovis. She was terrified, something she’d never felt facing a human opponent before. But Lovis…Lovis was more of a monster than a man.
“Hmph, well, this has been a pointless discussion anyway. You’re a boring conversationalist, Miss Hero.” Lovis snorted a laugh.
Pomera looked around her. “You said you only want to fight the strong, right? And you don’t have the same goal as the Cup of Blood, and that those two are just your opening act?” she asked.
“What of it?”
“R-right. Then if that’s the case, let the other people here go. In exchange, I won’t run. I will stay and fight you.”
It was a proposal that should be acceptable to both of them. If they had a group battle, Damia and Yozakura would join in as well. But if the people who came to the Guild to seek shelter or healing were allowed to leave, then Damia and Yozakura—his so-called opening act—would have no reason to fight. If the Black Reapers really were nothing more than pawns for Lovis to use to set up whatever fight he wanted, then he should accept.
Lovis’s face split in a wide, evil grin.
“Now *that’s* what I would expect from a hero like you, Pomera! Isn’t that just my perfect rival! Ha ha ha! Damia, Yozakura! Let the small fry run! Only kill the ones who seem like they might stay! We’ll do as the hero suggests!”
“We won’t give in to threats like that! Pomera, I’ll fight too!” said one adventurer as he readied his sword.

“Stop!” shouted Pomera. “Those two aren’t to be trifled with! I would prefer to stop those two from fighting, and if you stay to fight with me it will only hold me back. Just get yourselves to safety!”
A heavy silence fell after Pomera’s shouts.
“M-my apologies, miss…”
All the gathered people left the Guild at once. Pomera wondered if she’d made a wise decision, but the thought of people dying when she could have saved them hung heavy on her heart. It was a decision that might doom her, but it was the only decision that she could live with.
“Damia, Yozakura, keep an eye out for anyone who tries to interfere. Don’t you dare lay a finger on her. The Hero Pomera is *my* prey,” said Lovis.
A memory of a concerned-looking Philia filled Pomera’s mind.
“Philia will be sad if something bad happens to Pomera, so make sure she’s okay. Run if anything dangerous comes.”
It was almost like Philia knew this would happen.
“…I’m sorry, Philia,” whispered Pomera.

—2—

“NOT A SINGLE COCKROACH crawls its way in here,” said Lovis to his underlings.
They fell back to stand by the wall and nodded in understanding. Lovis grinned and raised his scythe.
“Let’s go, Hero Pomera! Wind Magic Level 4: Sickle Wind!”
Lovis swung his scythe three times. Three blades of wind rushed toward Pomera. She leapt far to the side to evade, and the blades rushed past to carve huge gashes in the wall.
“You’re fast… But not fast enough!” she said.
Pomera had often seen demons in Kanata’s Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm use magic far more powerful. Lovis’s magic wasn’t all that impressive compared to that.
She might not have known it, but Pomera was around level 200, while Lovis was around 180. She held the advantage.
“Fire Magic Level 7: Fireflies!” Pomera lifted her staff and made a magic circle. Ten orbs of fire appeared and flew forward as if they had minds of their own.
“How could a total unknown cast a level 7 spell that quickly… It seems Lovis was right to lose in Aries’s Hand,” said Yozakura when she saw Pomera’s spell.
“Incredible… It seems you pass the test when it comes to magical control,” said Lovis. He ran his tongue over his lips as he watched the balls of fire move.

“There’s nowhere for you to hide!” cried Pomera.
The ten flame balls encircled Lovis and moved in for the strike.
“Boss! Why aren’t you teleporting?!” shouted Damia.
Lovis slashed out with his scythe, destroying the ball of flame in front of him before somersaulting through the gap with an elegant twist. He slipped between the fiery orbs and landed on his feet before rushing at Pomera.
“It seems I’ll be able to go all out for the first time in a while! Wonderful! Thank you, Hero Pomera! This is the battle I’d hoped for!”
Lovis grinned evilly.
Pomera was the stronger fighter on paper. In terms of magic ability and level, there wasn’t that large a difference between them. However, there *was* a clear difference between the two of them in terms of dexterity, experience, and simple battle talent.
If their positions were reversed, Pomera would never have been able to evade a spell with such finesse. Even if she could do it, she doubted she could make it look that easy. Her lack of fighting experience caused her to hesitate.
Well. If a finely tuned attack wouldn’t work, she’d just have to hit him with a wide area attack. She could cast Fireflies as many times as she liked, but it wasn’t going to work on an opponent like Lovis. With that going through her mind, Pomera closed her eyes and raised her staff.
“Hm, spirit magic?” said Lovis with amusement.
“Spirit Magic Level 8: Salamander’s Claws!”
Fiery claws raked through the area. Everything within the room was knocked over, and a whole wall was rent open by the attack. The powerful strike forced Damia and Yozakura to the floor, barely managing to avoid harm by staying flat on their stomachs.
“Sh-she can cast something like that?!” cried Yozakura in shock.
Pomera looked around through the dust and smoke, breathing heavily.
It took dedicated concentration to call on the spirits and borrow their power. Pomera had stopped focusing on Lovis for a moment and could no longer see him. She looked down at the floor in front of her, but he was nowhere to be found.
“What was that? Big moves are either for wiping away a group of weak enemies or to force an opening so you can hit the strong enemy. I thought you had something in mind when you were casting that spirit magic spell, but you seem clueless. You’ve never fought someone as strong as me, have you?” She heard Lovis’s disappointed voice coming from behind her.
“Closing your eyes and focusing your attention on the spirits to cast a spell that has no merits beyond its area of effect and strength…that’s about as helpful as praying to the gods. Pathetic.”
“Ah!” Pomera swung her staff with all her strength. Lovis leapt backward, easily evading Pomera’s wild swing.
“If this is all the skill you have, you won’t be any fun to fight until you gain a few more levels. This isn’t what I expected at all. It seems I really should

have gone after Aries's Hand," he mumbled, sighing as he covered his eyes with a hand.
Pomera's heart thundered, and her breath came painfully. If Lovis had swung his scythe before talking to her, he would have killed her. If not for his whims, she would be dead right now. Terror gnawed at Pomera's throat. This fight might well be her last.
Pomera bit her lip, raised her staff, and made the magic circle. "Spirit Magic Level 6: Fox Fire!"
A ball of fire about the size of a person's head appeared in front of her.
"A wise choice. Finally," said Lovis.
Most of the control of the spell Fox Fire was left in the spirit's hands, and the spell lasted for a long time. If she used it perfectly, Pomera could cast other spells while keeping Fox Fire up. She could potentially manage her offense and defense simultaneously.
But that required delicate manipulation, like trying to thread a needle. In situations where the caster was already under intense psychological pressure, that difficulty increased even more. Beads of sweat appeared on Pomera's face.
Pomera moved the Fox Fire between her and Lovis. There was no way she could win if she let Lovis get into melee range with his scythe. She'd lose her head in the blink of an eye.
"Fire Magic Level 7: Fireflies!" Ten balls of fire flew at Lovis.
"Yes, good! Put up your defenses, make it so the enemy can't easily get close. Then make as many attacks as you can with the mid-range spells you're good at controlling. That's the standard strategy for a magic user," said Lovis with satisfaction as the balls of fire surrounded him. "Short Gate."
A magic circle appeared at Lovis's feet. He was encased in light, then disappeared. An instant later he was behind Pomera, his scythe raised.
"Whether or not a *standard* strategy will work against me is a different story. I think you would have managed as a B-rank adventurer," he said.
"Spirit Magic Level 3: Sylph Sword!" said Pomera, turning back and raising her staff at the same time.
Lovis evaded the close-range blade of wind with the tiniest of movements and continued to close in on Pomera.
In sheer terror, Pomera stood gripping her staff tight—a poor decision with a fortunate outcome. Lovis's scythe sliced through her staff, and the slight change in trajectory redirected the blade into a shallow slice across her chest instead of across her throat.
"A-ah!"
Pomera's small body was flung back, and she crashed to the floor. Blood splattered around her.
With her consciousness fading, Pomera brought a hand to her chest and felt something wet and warm. The terror of realizing it was her own blood snapped her back to reality.

“My…st-staff…” Pomera crawled across the floor, reached out, and pulled the mangled staff back to her side.
Behind Pomera, Lovis raised his scythe.
“You weren’t what I expected. But your lack of experience in battle compared to your high level means you’ve got some connection to someone special. I’m glad to learn there’s another pushover traveler in the area besides Aries’s Hand. They’re probably somewhere over level 300, right? Your head will make a fine lure to reel them in,” said Lovis.
Then his brow furrowed, and he hesitated.

—3—

LOVIS’S HANDS and the scythe he held stopped. Sweat beaded on his brow. He had heard the rumors about Pomera, though they were fragmented. She’d apparently carried the fight against the demon king Lily. And she had practically displaced Aries’s Hand as Manaloch’s guardian hero. Other rumors said she’d claimed bounties on hundreds of monsters and that she summoned a massive dragon spirit…though the city was full of arguments about how much of those were true.
But one rumor among those now demanded Lovis’s attention. That one said Pomera was originally from Arroburg. He didn’t know if that was true or not. If it *was* true though—it brought a horrifying possibility to light.
It meant that the pushover traveler might not be such a pushover at all. It might be…*him.* Kanata Kanbara, the terrifying creature he’d met and then run away from on the outskirts of Arroburg.
By providence, Lovis had managed to appease Kanata at the time. But if killing Pomera meant upsetting Kanata, it would surely be the end of his life the next time they met.
Pomera had an abnormally high level, and yet she was oddly weak at fighting other people. Anyone who could manage to pull up a novice adventurer’s level to around 200 in a few short weeks would have to at least be level 300 themselves.
But it wasn’t like people over level 300 were a coin a dozen around here. The natural conclusion was that Pomera’s teacher was in fact Kanata.
“I-If you’re going to kill me, just do it quickly,” said Pomera, her voice shaking as she squeezed her fists.
“…”
Lovis didn’t know what he should say. He stayed silent. His mind was running through all the possible scenarios.
If he just outright asked, and she said Kanata, then he just had to run. If she said anyone else, he could kill her. But there was a reason he couldn’t just ask.
Yozakura…

“Sir, what’s wrong?” she asked, sounding somewhat annoyed. He’d managed to convince her of his logic at the time, but she often said things that implied she’d still lost respect for him because of that incident.
She would surely understand if they fled because Kanata was standing in front of them…but if Lovis ran as fast as he could the moment he sensed Kanata’s shadow, it wasn’t hard to imagine she might start complaining again.
Yozakura and Damia were the heart of the Black Reapers. If they lost faith and left the organization, the other members would follow. The Black Reapers would fall apart.
“Hmph…” Lovis made up his mind and shook his head. Then he removed his scythe from Pomera’s neck. “Hero Pomera… No, not a hero. You’re just a little girl who’s gained some modicum of strength. You are nothing. But your magical talent and quick thinking may one day lead you to becoming a true hero. That and your moral spirit! When that happens… Ha ha! When *that* happens, I will come for you again. That sounds lovely, doesn’t it?” Lovis grinned and turned away.
“Let’s go, Damia, Yozakura. We had a good harvest. The Cup of Blood’s party is getting boring.”
His back still to Pomera, he moved slowly toward the Guild’s exit. “I have no interest in the Red Staff of Authority. Without someone to use it, it’s not even a proper decoration, it’s just a paperweight. Bosgin is up to something, but we can just hunt him down if his pathetic efforts pay off. And it seems that Aries’s Hand is even weaker than Pomera here.”
“What are you doing…?” asked Pomera, looking confused.
Lovis bit his lip. He must not have fooled her. If he was forced to say too much, he could get in trouble with Yozakura again.
“Pomera, we are kindred spirits. You showed you would easily risk your life, which means you view taking and giving lives on a broad scale. You may hold up the flag of justice sometimes, but in the end, you’re just as fascinated by battle as I,” he said.
“No, I—”
“Ha ha, I look forward to the next time we meet!” said Lovis quickly, cutting Pomera off. “Most importantly, that moment will be your last. Keep training!”
Pomera frowned but didn’t speak again. Besides, changing his mind would just go badly for her.
To be honest, Lovis didn’t see anything in common between them at all. As he left, he swore to himself that he would never meet this girl again. If she really did have some connection to Kanata, the next time they met could likely be *his* last moment.
“Sir,” said Yozakura as Lovis came near the exit.
“Hmm?” he asked.
“What are you so afraid of?” Yozakura’s forehead was wrinkled. She was clearly unhappy.

“What are you talking about? I’m getting tired of your insubordination. I have my honor and if you keep at this, I won’t hesitate to eliminate you.”
“No, that’s all fine. It’s just…you seem like you want to get out of this city as soon as possible.” Yozakura shot a look at Damia to seek agreement, but the mage refused to make eye contact. Then Yozakura said, “I’ll just come out and say it. You’ve seemed scared ever since that *incident*.”
“You’re overthinking it,” Lovis sighed. “Fine, so be it. If there’s something you want to say, we’ll discuss it later.”
“See, just like that. It’s like you’re trying to run away from this city.”
“You’re pressing your luck, Yozakura.”
As they bickered, an evil aura filled the space around them. It wasn’t just Lovis who sensed it—Yozakura, Damia, and Pomera did as well. It clearly wasn’t Kanata, but the desire to flee intensified for everyone.
“Anyway, let’s g—”
“Gravity Bomb.”
The second floor of the Guild exploded. Wooden fragments rained down from the ceiling. Lovis just stood there in shock, doing nothing to stop the wooden shards from hitting his face.
The ceiling was ripped away, and they could see the blue sky above. There floated a girl wearing a heavy black coat.
Beautiful white hair spilled from beneath her hood. What little of her skin was visible was so pale that it was practically translucent, giving her an inhuman beauty.
The overpowering aura was mysterious and sinister. Everything about her was…*wrong*. Her two mismatched eyes—emerald and crimson—stared at Pomera. Then the girl let out a long, self-effacing sigh.
“How far have I fallen, to consider just standing here and watching you die. Even if I had that thought for only a moment.”
Pomera faded in and out of consciousness, unable to understand what the girl said. She only understood that the danger had passed.
Then Lunaère turned her gaze to Lovis. “Pathetic villains like you exist in every era.”

—4—

LOVIS LOOKED UP through the hole in the roof as he wiped splinters from his face.
“Huh… You must be quite something to make me feel so threatened,” he said. His dread was tempered with relief that it wasn’t Kanata.
He looked beside him, to where Damia and Yozakura should have been standing. Instead, they sat on the floor, trembling.
Lovis was shaking too, but it wasn’t from fear. He was overcome with excitement.

The girl in front of him had an inhuman aura. He also hadn't caught what spell she'd used to destroy the ceiling. What he did know was that it wasn't of a normal scale or strength.
Finally, a powerful opponent!
She was calm as she faced Lovis down and had a certain dignity to her. He wasn't sure if he could stand against her, even if he fought with all his strength.
Since Lovis had suspected there was a connection between Pomera and Kanata, he'd wanted to leave this place immediately. But he couldn't let the prey in front of him now get away. Lovis instinctually felt that she was the goddess of battle he so longed for. She would give him the fight to the death he wanted.
Lunaère gently floated to the floor. Lovis grinned an evil, maniacal grin.
"B-Boss…?" said Yozakura in bewilderment at he saw the expression.
Without saying a word, Lovis swiftly flung his scythe. It twirled rapidly through the air, blurring into a circle as it flew toward Lunaère.
As someone who enjoyed the art of the fight itself, Lovis generally didn't start with an abrupt, all-out attack. He liked to start light to gauge his opponent. It was normal for him to express his will to fight and give his quarry a moment to either prepare for battle or wet themselves. It would be shameful to kill an opponent outright with a surprise attack.
This was different though. No matter how dirty the trick, he was going to do everything he could to stay alive. This would be a true fight. Lovis was certain; the being in front of him could handle everything he could throw at her.
Lunaère leaned sideways, easily evading the rapidly flying scythe.
"Short Gate!"
Lovis appeared behind Lunaère, opening his arms to grab the scythe before swinging its wicked blade back around toward Lunaère without losing any momentum. Lunaère didn't even turn to look. She just dropped her head and let the blade pass above her.
Lovis disappeared again. He teleported beside Lunaère and swung his scythe. But she evaded again, by a hair's width. Lovis struck from every direction, but Lunaère responded to each swing without her expression changing in the least.
"Wonderful! Fascinating! Who is this girl?!"
He leapt back to put some distance between them, but Lunaère closed in swiftly. She extended her forefinger and jabbed Lovis in the forehead.
"Huh…?" Lovis went sailing away, bouncing across the floor on his shoulders and hips. He finally stopped when he crashed into the opposite wall and let out a groan. "U-urgh, wh-what just…?"
Lunaère raised a hand, and the Impurity Sealing Robe fell from her shoulders. Her white clothes were revealed, as was her beautiful face. The unholy impurity that had been held in check came flooding out in full force.

Lovis stopped as he tried to get back to his feet. More accurately, he was forced to stop. His knees shook. He couldn't move. He collapsed back to the floor on his rear.
He'd thought he might actually have a chance fighting against the girl in front of him. But now despair flooded through him as he realized just how far removed she was from anything alive. Sweat poured from his entire body like he was a damp cloth being wrung out. He couldn't move a muscle, and it felt as if an oppressive weight was forcing him to the floor. His teeth chattered; tears streamed from the corners of his eyes.
Barely able to move his mouth, he sobbed, "I was wrong…"
He'd wanted an honorable fight to the death, but he realized too late he'd bumbled into committing suicide.
Kanata wasn't the first opponent Lovis had met who he'd been completely incapable of standing against. There was nothing he could do against those beasts of men who stood at the high end of the humanoid dragon scale. Even this country had them—absolute powerhouses that couldn't be resisted and rarely showed themselves. Only that wisdom had allowed him to escape from Kanata with his life.
But the girl who appeared in front of him was incomparable to anything he'd ever seen before. He couldn't fathom why this monster would suddenly appear in Manaloch.
No, monster was too weak a word. The girl in front of him was a force of the universe. Her very presence was oppressive.
The average person might only encounter one humanoid dragon in their lifetime, and those humanoid dragons were just over level 300. They were so feared by the world at large that their general locations were easily discovered.
So then why…*how*…did these beings of unknowably high level keep walking into his life seemingly at random? Why did he keep running into them?
Lovis cursed his endless bad luck.

—5—

LOVIS'S TREMBLING abated slightly, but he still couldn't breathe properly. Unable to gather his thoughts, he just sat there frozen with his head hanging as he heard Lunaère's footsteps draw closer like the blade being raised on a guillotine.
"I-Is there something I can help you with…?" he said.
They were absurd words, but the only ones he could manage at the time. He didn't think that a being like this, practically a god, would have any interest in his help. But maybe she would let him go. Lovis clung to that hope.
"A wicked person like you who gleefully attacks the innocent can help me with *nothing*," said Lunaère. There was a cool, blatant hostility in Lunaère's

words. It seemed she planned to kill him. “How pathetic are you, that you can only gain joy from harming others?”
Lunaère took another step toward Lovis. Without hesitation, Lovis bowed his head to the floor.
“P-please forgive me! We never had a deep relationship with the Cup of Blood. I simply wanted to fight with the girl known as Saint Pomera. I swear, I haven’t harmed a single person in the city. Ah! Yes! I-I can tell you their plans!”
Lunaère’s eyebrows knit in uncertainty.

“L-Lovis, Sir, didn’t you insist that last incident was an exception?!” Yozakura said suddenly when she saw Lovis instantly grovel on the floor.
Lovis snarled and shouted, “This is an exceptional situation too! Didn’t you see how she moved?! You’re not showing enough deference! You too, Pomera! I have no idea what your social status is, but if you value your life, then bow your head! Hurry! Are you trying to get us all killed?!”
Pomera’s mouth gaped as she sat on the floor hugging her broken staff. She did understand that the person in front of them now was abnormal…but Lovis’s shift in attitude was remarkable. It almost made her giddy. The only thing she could imagine was that he’d suddenly been replaced by a different person.
“Hurry, Pomera! You don’t know what will happen to you otherwise!” shouted Lovis again.
“Hmm…?” Something in Pomera’s memory caught her attention, and she sat there confused for a moment. Something Lovis said wasn’t right. This led to a question…an honest question. “…But you *did* harm someone. Those two men, right?”
Lovis had just claimed he hadn’t harmed a single person. But just before his battle with Pomera, he’d cut off the heads of the Mystery Brothers. The lie had left Lovis’s lips so naturally that she hadn’t noticed it right away, but she’d seen him kill someone with her own two eyes.
Lovis slammed the floor with his fist.
“I meant *innocent* people! Stop picking at unimportant details!” shouted Lovis, spittle flying. He then quickly turned back to Lunaère and bowed his head again. Then, in a honey-sweet tone, he groveled, “I swear, I have not harmed any of this city’s citizens! In fact, I put an end to two of the attacking bandits!”
“He changed his story so smoothly…” said Pomera, actually impressed by Lovis’s gall.
Lunaère looked uncertain, but then looked at Pomera and said, “You, over there.”
“Uh… M-me?”
“Yes. What do you think of him?”
“When he first came here, he did obviously seem to plan on harming the injured people here. If not for that, I wouldn’t have fought him.”
Lunaère turned back to Lovis with an expectant look.
“I-It’s not what it looks like! I might have said things like that, but I had no intentions of laying a finger on worthless small fr—I mean, innocent civilians.”
Lunaère’s eyes looked like she was staring at a worm. Lovis’s face turned pale. It appeared that his time was growing short.
“Sir…” said Yozakura. Lovis looked at her, his eyes begging, as she said, “There’s no point. Let’s just give in, Sir. Please don’t embarrass us any longer. As a lead henchman of the Black Reapers, I will accompany you to hell.”

Yozakura's voice was surprisingly calm and quiet as she stood and drew her katana.
"I told you before! This is like a natural disaster! You and Damia feel things are so strange because you're seeing this person as simply a powerful human! Why won't you understand even though I've explained it to you?! Are you seriously considering *fighting* her?!" screeched Lovis.
Yozakura shook her head. "No, I mean ritual suicide. Don't worry, I will follow just behind you."
Lunaère observed this exchange emotionlessly. "You are such a pathetic person. Given the current situation, I lack the time to listen to all of your pitiful excuses. But, if you have any last words you would like to say, I will allow you to say them now."
That was a clear declaration of Lovis's impending execution. With his head still bowed, his mind churned desperately.
How did this happen? This sort of thing was as unlikely as getting struck by a meteorite—twice! The kind of rare coincidence that you couldn't make happen if you wanted to! And yet, he happened to pick a fight with Kanata and got beaten up himself instead. And just a few months later, he ran into a girl he didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell against.
What horrible, terrible luck.
That's when Lovis realized something. These weren't coincidences. This kind of luck wasn't random. There had to be some logical connection.
"By any chance, would you happen to know a Master Kanata…?" asked Lovis.
Lunaère's eyes grew wide. Her mouth turned down in confusion, and a hot crimson blush bloomed on her pale, death-like cheeks.
"H-how do you know Kanata?" she asked.
Hiding his reaction, Lovis squeezed his hands into fists of victory. It was a miracle. He'd somehow found a narrow escape from his impending death.
"Yes, yes, I know him! It might be somewhat presumptuous to call him a good friend of mine, but he is a person I hold in the highest esteem."
Based on Lunaère's expression, Lovis guessed that Lunaère wasn't an enemy of Kanata's. They must have had some sort of close relationship. It made sense…being a traveler from another world wasn't enough to explain his incredibly high level. So, Kanata either found an item of some kind or—*or!*—he had some sort of high-level teacher. That had to be it. This scary girl was Kanata's teacher!
"B-both of you know Kanata…?" murmured Pomera in bewilderment.
Lovis was now certain he had been right; Kanata really was Pomera's teacher. He didn't show his emotion on his face, but a wave of relief washed through him. If he'd beheaded her, he would surely be a dead man.
"Sir…" Damia started to protest, but Lovis silenced him with a pointed stare.

“Kanata would never get close to someone like you,” whispered Lunaère, biting her thumb. She had been thrown by Lovis’s sudden claim, but now she was clearly doubting his words.
Lovis gulped, knowing it would be dangerous if things continued this way. “Y-your beautiful face, your incredible magic! Your stunning, flowing hair, like pure white silk with flaming tips! No! I couldn’t believe it at first, but it must be true! Master Kanata spoke of you often. You are his teacher, correct?” said Lovis.
“K-Kanata talked about me?! O-oh…” Lunaère’s cheeks turned a shade redder. She was obviously flustered. Her eyes, which had been staring at Lovis with doubt, now turned away, and she twirled the red-tinged tips of her hair.
“He’s so much trouble. I know Kanata can be a little stupid sometimes, but he should have understood that he shouldn’t speak about me so easily to people outside… Really, now…” she muttered to herself.
“No no no, it’s only because Master Kanata trusted me so much. It seemed he really wanted to talk about you to someone, considering how deeply he respects you,” said Lovis.
Pomera looked confused as she glanced between Lovis and Lunaère. She had never once seen this beautiful, mysterious girl in her life. She also didn’t remember hearing a single thing about her from Kanata.
And yet, the shady leader of a criminal organization had somehow heard about this girl from Kanata. It was almost like Kanata trusted Lovis more than he did her. Here he was, speaking so passionately like Kanata was his lifelong friend. That wasn’t all! He was even going on and on with facts that matched this mystery girl’s statements.
Damia and Yozakura were utterly lost. They were even more confused than Pomera. They’d been there near Arroburg the whole time and they hadn’t heard Kanata say anything about a pale, scary girl. Lovis didn’t have any relationship with Kanata, friendly or otherwise. All that happened was Lovis groveling a lot and Kanata deciding to spare him despite the attempted murder. Lovis’s lies were so skilled that he was even tricking Damia and Yozakura into believing that perhaps he’d gotten closer to Kanata at some point when they weren’t listening.
“S-so what did he say?” asked Lunaère.
“What?” said Lovis.
“A-about me. Wh-what did Kanata say about me?” she asked, the words seemingly difficult to get out.
“Well, of course, he spoke of how you are an incredible lady…a *perfect* lady! He said you were the person he most respected in the world.”
“D-did he…? And, umm… D-did he say anything else? Besides that?”
Lovis secretly wondered if a monster would be concerned about things like love, and if that might be his ticket out of this mess.
“Welll… Master Kanata didn’t tell me all the details, I’m not sure it’s my place to really say this, but…yes. He did say that he truly loved you.”

Lovis carefully chose his words as he gauged Lunaère's reaction. She turned bright red and looked down, fiddling with the tips of her hair anxiously. Seeing that, Lovis knew he'd won. It had been a dangerous gamble. If he'd been wrong, he could have been subjected to a fate worse than death.
"K-Kanata is casually telling people things like that?! R-ridiculous! He's so much trouble. He's normally so mild, I wouldn't have expected him to suddenly start saying things like that. B-but…he really did say it, didn't he…?" asked Lunaère.
"Y-yes. Well, it's not as if he's saying it to just anyone. And I suppose it is true that he didn't use those exact words…"
"He *didn't* say he loved me?" Lunaère's eyes snapped wide open, and her gaze pinned Lovis to the floor. The room felt a few degrees colder.
"Of course he said it! Of course!"
Lovis had somehow managed to wriggle out of a swift execution, but he knew his luck was running thin. If she kept asking questions, sooner or later the truth would come out and that would mean his goose was cooked. He needed to cut this conversation short and get far away from here.
"I swear I will change my ways, and from now on, I'll live to help people and the world! So, please…may I leave?" asked Lovis.
"…Of course, I couldn't harm a friend of Kanata's. I couldn't bear to make him sad…and I don't think I could keep living if he hated me…" muttered Lunaère as she worried over what to do. Just as Lovis was breathing a sigh of relief, Lunaère lifted a hand casually and said, "Summoning Magic Level 23: Yama Dharmaraja."
A jet-black magic circle filled the entire floor of the Guild.
"L-Level…t-twenty…th-three…?" muttered Lovis, his mouth agape as he turned over Lunaère's words in his mind.
Until Lovis met Kanata, he'd believed that magic only went up to level 15 spells, and those only existed in legends. However, Kanata had used Gravity Bomb in front of Lovis, which was when Lovis learned that magic went up to level 19. Level 23 magic was a new and terrifying revelation.
From the circle arose a gigantic red demon with four arms, so tall it burst through the Guild's ceiling. It sat on the floor, but Lovis still couldn't see its head until the beast stooped down, finally showing its face.
It had a fearsome expression and three inorganic-looking eyes. It wore opulent clothing and a black crown on its head. Around its neck was a necklace made from human heads, their eyes rolled back and groaning in pain.
"What…wh-wh-what is, what is this monster…?" asked Lovis.
Lunaère reached up to gently pat the massive demon's knee.
"This is Yama Dharmaraja. It will check to see if you're lying to me," explained Lunaère.
Lovis prepared himself for death.
Yama Dharmaraja lowered its head and fixed its three eyes onto Lovis.

“And…h-how does it do th-that?” asked Lovis, looking tense.
“The eye on Yama Dharmaraja’s forehead can see the flow of fate. Put simply, he can tell if the person in front of him is lying or not with just a look,” said Lunaère as she pointed to her own forehead.
“R-right…”
“And if Yama Dharmaraja determines the subject he is investigating is lying, he eats them. Their souls are trapped for eternity within his stomach, suffering and unable to move on. He shouldn’t react to jokes or metaphors, but just in case, try not to say anything unnecessary. Now please repeat what you said earlier.”
Lovis looked up at the demon.
It opened its mouth. Inside, the outline of a human glowed faintly as it stretched out its arms and writhed in pain. Screams of the captured dead echoed from inside the demon. Then it closed its mouth and moved its jaw up and down like it was chewing something.
Lovis actually stopped sweating.
If he continued, he would end up facing a fate far worse than death. He seriously regretted not realizing that something like this might happen. This girl—this *force of nature*—belied all his understanding of the world. He’d realized that the moment she’d taken off her black coat. It would probably be best if he just gave up and went along with it at this point.
“S-sir…” Yozakura started to say something to Lovis but found herself at a loss for words. Not only had her mind been rattled from the moment Lunaère had appeared, but she was also completely thrown off balance by her boss’s lies.
And now a demon was probably going to eat him. She couldn’t keep up with anything that was happening today.
She wasn’t the only one bewildered by the circumstances. Damia and Pomera both sat silent, unable to do anything but watch events unfold.
“What’s wrong?” said Lunaère, hurrying Lovis along.
Lovis gulped and prepared himself. Then he began to speak.
“I-I owe my life to Master Kanata. A short time ago, I was in a dangerous situation, I was close to being killed, and he saved me.”
Lunaère looked up at the huge demon. It sat quietly, watching Lovis.
“After that, I helped Master Kanata with something, just a little thing. I gave him a gift, and we traveled together. And through that…we became closer.”
The demon nodded, but there was no further reaction from it.
“Well, you didn’t have to go into that much detail. But it seems you truly weren’t lying,” said Lunaère, and Lovis let out a sigh of relief. He felt like his heart was going to jump out of his throat.
He hadn’t actually lied…he’d simply glossed over the fact that his life had been in danger because he’d attacked Kanata and that Kanata saved him by forgiving him. You could even say that Lovis did owe Kanata his life.

The gift Lovis gave Kanata, the task he completed for him, and traveling with him were all things Lovis had done to butter Kanata up and avoid angering him. The only reason they'd traveled together was that Kanata didn't know much about the outside world and asked Lovis to show him the way. They were indeed with each other the whole time until they reached town, so you might say that they did become closer—if just a little—during that time.

If Lunaère drew her own conclusions, well, that wasn't his problem.

"Well then, if you are a friend of Kanata, I have no choice… Please leave," said Lunaère.

"Y-yes! Thank you so much for overlooking this transgression!" said Lovis.

Lunaère raised her arm toward the wall. Black light appeared and space began to warp before collapsing in on itself. With a sudden roar, the wall was destroyed.

"However," said Lunaère, pointing at Lovis, "by letting you go, I am now responsible for what you do. If I learn that you have committed evil acts in other places, I will accept my responsibility and find you. Remember this."

"U-understood! P-please give my regards to Master Kanata!" said Lovis as he bowed over and over. He crawled across the ground, then stood, grabbed Damia and Yozakura by their shirt collars, and dragged them outside.

Lunaère watched them go and then dismissed the spirit she had summoned. Then she turned to look at Pomera, who was frozen in place. Her eyes narrowed as she stared hard at the white mage.

"…"

Pomera was overwhelmed by her aura, but Lunaère's eyes were even scarier than when she'd looked at Lovis. Pomera sensed fathomless emotions churning behind that sublime, two-toned gaze.

"Wh-wh-what is it? Umm… Y-you know Kanata…right?" asked Pomera.

Lunaère's eyes were still narrowed in distrust. She slowly moved closer to Pomera like a stalking cat.

"Ah! P-p-please don't eat me, I don't taste nice!"

"…Spacetime Magic Level 23: Retrograde."

Lunaère held her hand up, and a gentle light flowed from it. Pomera's wounds closed before her eyes.

"I-Impossible…"

Pomera stared where her injuries had been, dumbstruck.

Her wounds closed, and the blood flowed backward into her body, leaving not a single scar behind. None of the white magic Pomera had learned could do something like this. This was so far beyond enhancing the body's ability to regrow.

Lunaère nodded coldly to herself.

"Spacetime Magic Level 22: Object Memory."

Light glittered through the building. The rubble came together and floated through the air. In a few moments, the ruined Adventurers' Guild was

returned to its original state. It was like the Cup of Blood had never attacked.
“Th-this is… U-umm, Miss…wh-who are you? You know Kanata, right?” asked Pomera in confusion.
Lunaère closed her eyes and seemed to hesitate. Afterward, she turned back gently and said, “Your name is Pomera…right?”
“Huh? Y-yes, it is.”
Lunaère took a deep breath and then pointed a finger at Pomera.
“I-I won’t let you take Kanata! R-remember that!” said Lunaère, her face beet red. Then she fled the Guild at an incredible speed. Pomera could only stare at her back in confusion.
A few minutes later, the adventurers returned to the Guild. They were still wary and held their weapons at the ready, but they let out cheers of joy the moment they saw Pomera.
“A-amazing! I knew the Holy Fist would win!”
“I told you! I saw them! That guy Lovis and his lackeys were running from here like it was the end of the world!”
Pomera listened to what the adventurers said and then started shaking her head vigorously.
“N-no! Th-that’s not what happened!” she pleaded.
“Look, Holy Fist is uninjured too! Three against one, and she still managed to wipe the floor with them!”
“No! There’s another explana—!”
“And the building, it was destroyed, but it’s back to normal… Saint Pomera’s white magic can even heal the wounds of buildings?!”
The Guild was filled with cheers.
“No! No! Don’t just decide this is all because of me! I’ll really get angry!”

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Elsewhere, Lovis, Damia, and Yozakura fell to the ground in a field, their breathing ragged after their narrow escape.
“I thought that was the end… I really thought we were done for this time… Damia, Yozakura, you probably know already, but we’re never going to Manaloch again. I feel like I’m going to puke just thinking about it,” said Lovis.
“Who was that girl? You seemed to know her, but…” said Damia.
“Huh? How the hell would I know who she is?”
“What?”
“You two were with me the entire time! You think I found time to talk one-on-one with Kanata?”
“B-but…”
“I don’t even know the name of that white-tinted girl. We got out of there just in time, but she obviously had plans to meet up with Kanata in

Manaloch. Those lies are going to be the death of me if we ever see her again!”
“S-sir…” said Yozakura, looking at Lovis and failing to find the words she needed.
“What?! Are you seriously still judging me?!”

Chapter 4:
The Puppet's Coffins

—1—

AS KANATA RESUMED his patrol of the city, two figures faced off on the roofs of Manaloch.

Kotone stood in her light robe and adjusted her simple gauntlets as she stared at her opponent with emotionless eyes.

Bosgin was a giant of a man—inhumanly large with his bald head towering twice as high as the top of hers. With the nickname of Big Arm Bosgin, his biceps were nearly as large as her waist.

"Lovis is takin' his sweet time with someone else. No problem to me if he does," said Bosgin as he glanced in the direction of the Adventurers' Guild. "I asked him to come along and give us a hand with the fight, but you were always gonna be *my* target."

"You're the leader of this mess…" said Kotone, glaring at Bosgin as she raised her gauntlet-clad hands in a fighting stance.

Bosgin smiled, though it didn't reach his glassy eyes.

"You've done quite the number on my men, haven't you?" he said.

"…What are you after?"

"Don't play dumb. You were supposed to get an item from those pansy knights at the Guild." Bosgin tried to hold back a chuckle.

"If that's what you were after, you just needed to attack the knights. Why not jump them before they ever got into the city? It looks like your goal was to cause trouble here."

"Ha! I thought you'd be a brat who'd rely on your gift skill to avoid trouble at any cost, but you've been a thorn in our side, haven't you now? And you still haven't figured it out yet?"

Kotone's eyes narrowed as Bosgin spoke, a crease forming between her brows. Bosgin was an unpleasant man, hiding a cold intelligence behind his ogrish appearance.

"Well… I could say we wanted to strike fear into the heart of Manaloch to spread the name of the Cup of Blood. Would you buy that?"

"Are you screwing with me?"

"No! I like you, Aries's Hand! I like *clever* girls!"

Bosgin ran his fat tongue over his lips, then he pushed off the roof and came rushing at Kotone. Below his feet the tiles and shingles fractured and fell like dead leaves.

Swinging his massive fists to bring them down at her feet, cracks formed around him, and the roof began to buckle. Kotone lost her footing as the timbers gave way beneath her.

"Don't go gettin' surprised by something like that!"

Kotone regained her balance and dodged her way to safety.
“Hm? Seems you *are* used to a fight. But ya came unarmed. That won’t help the Aries’s Hand much, will it?” asked Bosgin with a smirk.
“I have these,” said Kotone as she showed him the gauntlets, then raised her arms and fell back into a fighting stance.
“You gonna go mano-a-mano, with me? You must be kidding!” said Bosgin as he swung his massive arms at Kotone.
As he approached, Kotone said, “Bosgin, also known as Big Arm, leader of the massive criminal organization the Cup of Blood. Criminal scum and a potential humanoid dragon. A living, breathing natural disaster…”
She dodged his attack by moving closer to his chest, then struck him hard there. Bosgin went sailing through the air.
“Gah!”
“Sorry, but I’m not going to lose to someone like you,” she said.
Kotone followed up with a flying kick to his gut as he soared defenselessly through the air. But he grabbed her ankle a fraction of a second before it landed.
“Don’t let your guard down, clever girl.”
He used all his strength to fling her upward, the muscles of his left arm bulging and expanding.
“Ha ha ha… Ya say you ain’t gonna lose to someone like me, girlie? I’m the one who beat every one of those thugs into line and made the Cup of Blood! You want to get things done, you best be willing to crack a few heads.”
“Spacetime Magic Level 8: Dimension Pocket.” Kotone cast while still in the air. In her hands she gripped a shining blue axe, five times as long as she was tall. “Ancient Axe of the Giant.”
Her eyes locked onto Bosgin, and the axe moved in a perfect arc as she swung it. It sank deep into the roof that he was standing on. One moment, cracks ran throughout the entire building. The next, it collapsed. Bosgin fell two stories onto the rubble-strewn ground. The attack made his opening strike look anemic.
He was covered in blood and lay writhing on his back. Kotone looked down at his broken form; the massive axe had already been sent back to the Dimension Pocket.
“G-gurgh…” Blood gurgled from Bosgin’s mouth. It was a fatal wound. Both arms were broken by the impact of his fall.
“I came to terms with cracking heads a long time ago. Tell me your goal. How’d you learn about the Red Staff of Authority? Where is it now?” asked Kotone.
“Y-y…” Bosgin’s voice was weak. Kotone leaned in slightly to hear him. “You really are the kind of girl I like.”
His voice was odd—his tone and way of speaking was changing. Kotone frowned.
His eyes, about to close a moment before, snapped open and looked at Kotone as he swung his massive, broken arms. That should have been

impossible for a man on death's door, and Kotone was forced to leap backward to escape the blow.
"You still have that much strength in you…?" she asked, stunned.
He stretched his arms out and then cracked his neck.
"Hmm… Can I make do with this? Such fragile puppets, always causing me trouble," he said, his voice suddenly taking on a jarringly feminine tone. He then looked around him. "Well, this seems like a suitably private location. Death Magic Level 11: Puppet Coffin!"
Jet-black magic circles appeared around Bosgin. The light from the magic circles took form, turning into three physical caskets.
"L-Level 11?!" said Kotone, her eyes going round.
Kotone had seen her fair share of fights against high-level opponents. Partly because of the power of her gift skill, but mostly because she was a traveler and could never escape the gods' constant gaze and meddling. Her fate was one of forever being drawn into battles. She hated that and longed to draw her manga in peace.
She'd seen a lot, but an enemy classified as a humanoid dragon could only cast, at most, a level 10 spell. People who could use levels 11 or 12 were rare. Bosgin was only a humanoid dragon if you combined his strength with that of the Cup of Blood. To see him cast a level 11 spell with no preparation—while on the brink of death—was truly bizarre. Especially when she'd never heard of him using spells at all.
"I…thought you made yourself the leader by your physical strength alone," said Kotone.
The three coffins started rocking back and forth.
"Clever girl… Now let's begin what I really came for, Kotone," said Bosgin, his eyes looking in different directions and his tongue hanging from the corner of his mouth. "I think this little puppet won't be enough, so I'll need to use my others. While it's unfortunate I didn't manage to get by without them, you've left me with little choice. Perhaps I should have led Lovis a little more directly."
Bosgin bent his joints in strange directions, putting them back to where they were before the fall.
"Who are you? You never were Bosgin, were you?" asked Kotone as she glared at the animated body. She retreated a few steps, raising her gauntlet-clad hands. If her opponent wasn't the leader of the Cup of Blood, it was someone even worse than him. She realized that this was no longer a situation she could handle on her own.
Two of the Puppet Coffins popped open. An arm reached out of one and pushed the lid aside. A sleeper had awoken.
"Well now…is this lovely little lady my opponent? If it's for justice's sake, then we shall have a fair fight!" said the man who appeared, leveling his longsword at her.
He was an attractive man with a golden beard that joined with his sideburns, his impression both immaculate and rugged. The blue and gold

of his armor marked him as a member of the Royal Knights. Kotone remembered hearing stories about a man with his appearance.
“Impossible… Hundred Monsters Gallan?!” she exclaimed.
It was a title as much as a nickname. A knight who could stand against waves of enemies was given the title of Hundred Monsters. At any given time, there were over a hundred Royal Knights in the king’s service, but maybe only ten in a generation were given the title of Hundred Monsters. They were the kingdom’s last line of defense against demon kings and humanoid dragons.
Gallan had gone missing three years earlier. Because he had apparently been acting strangely for a while before then, there were rumors that he was a spy for another country. And yet, here he was…
“I don’t enjoy fighting other humans, but it appears I have no choice,” said the man climbing out of the other coffin. “And just to clarify—just because I don’t enjoy fighting humans doesn’t mean I’m not good at it.”
He had long hair and a monocle. There were leather belts strapped all over him, from which hung all sorts of weapons—a bow, a sword, a spear, and an axe, to name a few.
This was Barrot, an S-rank adventurer given the nickname “Dungeon Master” for his habit of going into high-level dungeons alone and coming back alive.
Kotone looked at the two men, her eyes narrowing. Both of them were strong enough to stand against Kotone one on one. The third coffin didn’t move, but there was obviously something hiding inside.
“…Barrot the Dungeon Master. You never belonged to an organization, so you were never listed as missing,” she said.
“It was better that way, actually,” said Bosgin’s body. “I wanted to leave our Gallan here in the Royal Knights as long as possible, but their rules are so strict. Not all of the Royal Knights are morons, and it would’ve been a problem if they traced him back to me.”
Kotone had some idea about the true nature of the Puppet Coffin spell that Bosgin had used. She had heard of death magic that manipulated a person’s soul, allowing the magician to control the target’s body while leaving their personality intact. The legends said those spells were used in ancient times by spies to take over countries and enact evil plots.
Considering Bosgin’s tone before it changed, and how Gallan and Barrot sounded now, their personalities were still there. The caster was warping their thoughts and perceptions, making them act as the puppet master wanted. But considering how Bosgin was acting now, it was possible that his body had become so damaged that his personality and thoughts had been completely subsumed.
Bosgin, Gallan, and Barrot were all equivalent to S-rank adventurers, and now all three were pawns. That meant she was facing a humanoid dragon of at least medium power, perhaps stronger. Why did they want the Red Staff of Authority? It was nothing more than a decoration.

“Why? Someone as powerful as you shouldn’t need to attack a city just for money…” asked Kotone, shifting her eyes between the three men.
“You shouldn’t underestimate the Red Staff. Someone running wild with that weapon would be unstoppable. The royals of old killed the traveler who owned it and hid the Red Staff. Quite foolish of them to let the knowledge of its power fade over the ages,” said Bosgin, the corners of his mouth curling up. As a man of few expressions, the smile looked unnatural and creepy.
“Are you saying you can use the staff? It’s got strict requirements for equipping it. And…it seems you must have planned for that. But maybe you don’t have it yet. It looks like the Royal Knights managed to hide it well… unfortunately for you,” said Kotone.
Bosgin opened his mouth wide in a laugh. At the same time, Gallan and Barrot also started laughing in sync.
“What’s so funny?” asked Kotone.
“I’m sorry, miss,” said Gallan, “We’ve already taken the Red Staff of Authority from my three compatriots. Bosgin’s Cup of Blood underlings were more than enough for that. Really now… The training of the current generation of Royal Knights leaves much to be desired.”
“Besides, we never thought it would be all that difficult to procure the Red Staff,” added Barrot. “It was easy to get info on the knights’ route. The moment the staff left the castle guarded by only three low-level knights, we were worried that it would get stolen first by someone else. I know they’re shorthanded, but the Royal Knights really should have been a bit more careful, don’t you think, Gallan?”
Kotone’s eyes opened wide. She still wasn’t sure why Bosgin had come after her if they’d already stolen the Red Staff, but the entire situation was growing more ominous by the moment.
“Watch your tongue. An unaffiliated adventurer like you wouldn’t know anything about the doctrine of the Royal Knights. They’re always short on people since they’re constantly on the lookout for humanoid dragons. You can’t blame them for using a token force to transport a trinket. Besides, I bet things are still chaotic since I went missing,” said Gallan with a shrug, his tone slightly joking.
“My apologies, Gallan. But what I’m trying to say is that they should have seen this kind of thing coming, don’t you think? They shouldn’t have transported an item with a connection to the gods without planning for this eventuality,” replied Barrot.
The two chatted back and forth, smiling. It was nothing but disturbing to Kotone.
“…If you already have it, why are you causing this much trouble in the city? Shouldn’t you just leave?” she broke in.
The three all looked at Kotone at the same time and smiled.
“Ah ha, isn’t it obvious?” asked Gallen

“There’s no way to use the Red Staff of Authority on its own,” Barrot said. “How boring is it to get one piece of the puzzle while the other is hidden from you?”
“You should always steal the key along with the lock,” Bosgin added. “Or in this case, should I say the Aries’s Hand along with the staff?”
“The key and the lock… No…” said Kotone, sweat beading on her forehead. She was the key to be stolen. Puppet Coffin was a spell that let them freely control other people. Their goal from the beginning had been to capture Kotone and her Aries’s Hand. And to do that she had to be drawn out of hiding in Manaloch.
“I thought I might subdue you if I tried going after you with one little meat puppet at a time, but you turned out to be stronger than I expected,” said Bosgin as he stepped forward. At the same time, Hundred Monsters Gallan and Barrot the Dungeon Master moved. Gallan raised his sword, and Barrot drew an axe and a sickle on a chain. “But you’re not strong enough to take all three at once!”
These three were probably around the same strength as S-rank adventurers. She had managed to keep the upper hand in a one-on-one fight with Bosgin, but this was the first time Kotone had ever faced odds like these.
Kotone was level 208, a level far above the minimum requirement for being an S-rank adventurer. She didn’t broadcast her own level to others, but she knew she was among the top ten most powerful people in the kingdom. It had been high enough that it made her the de facto guardian of the city of Manaloch.
She could only check their level, HP, and MP, but it would at least give her a clue about how she should proceed.
“Status Check!”

BOSGIN BOWGRANE
Race: Human
Lv: 173
HP: 148/865
MP: 18/709

GALLAN GASTIALA
Race: Human
Lv: 210
HP: 966/966
MP: 1029/1029

BARROT BARMILIO
Race: Human
Lv: 189
HP: 895/895

MP: 890/890

"…Not good," muttered Kotone.
The average level was 190. Normally, you'd only get a lineup like this when fighting a demon king.
The one she *should* target would be Bosgin. While Bosgin might be the lowest level and severely injured, she still couldn't take him lightly. His bones had broken in multiple places when he fell, but that wasn't slowing him down at all—even now, his movements were unnatural, like his limbs were being jerked around by strings.
Barrot would be next, and she'd deal with Gallan later. He didn't seem to be the kind of swordsman she could land a decisive hit on while she was dealing with multiple enemies.
Barrot threw the counterweight on the opposite end of the chain from the sickle. It was a complicated weapon—the chain could be controlled by the weight, or the weight could be controlled by the chain. If she didn't defend well against it, she could end up wrapped up and unable to move. Kotone handled it neatly by punching the weight away with her gauntlet.
"Barrier Magic Level 6: Divide." Gallan raised his sword, which emitted a physical barrier of light. It split the floor as it rushed at Kotone. She leapt to the right and evaded.
At the same time, Bosgin moved in that direction and swung his arm. They had locked down Kotone's movements with the chain and Divide, then sprung the trap when she moved in the only way she could.
Their coordination was too perfect. There really had to be a single person controlling all three of them.
"Ah! Spacetime Magic Level 8: Dimension Pocket!" said Kotone, raising her hand toward Bosgin. "Aegis the Defender!"
In her hand appeared a massive circular shield, its diameter as wide as she was tall. It was a shining silver color, with a carving of a woman's face in the center. Blue gems were embedded in the engraving's eyes.
Bosgin's arm crashed into the shield. For an instant, it seemed as if the shield would be flung aside by his blow, but Kotone struck the back of the shield with her knee, using the impact to support the aegis.
Light poured from the gemstones, and Bosgin stopped moving. Tremors ran through his body as he tried to struggle free, but he wasn't going anywhere.
"Hmph… It counterttacks with a freeze. Nice item," muttered Bosgin through a clenched jaw.
Kotone tried to feint around the shield to finish Bosgin off, but Barrot's chain flew into her path. Gallan came in from the other side, aiming for the opening Kotone left when she bent and moved back to avoid the chain.
"Unfortunately for you, there are too many of us," said Gallan.
"Dimension Pocket!" A jade-colored sword appeared in Kotone's hands.
"Aeolus the Blowing Wind!"

A wind spirit residing in the sword increased its speed. It allowed the wielder to strike faster and harder, but it was difficult for an average swordsman to control.
“Did you decide you lacked the skills to fight me? How careless of you, to think you could win against me with a sword that relies on speed,” said Gallan.
He rapidly thrust his sword three times. Kotone guarded against two with her own sword and then evaded the last by leaning out of the way.
She counterattacked, and Gallan defended with his sword. The blades locked together.
“Huh… It seems you haven’t given up on skill. I retract my rude comment from a moment ago, but this is as far as you go,” he said.
He pushed heavily onto the blade and flung Kotone back, forcing her to lose her footing. She gasped as Barrot’s chain wrapped around her left arm when she stumbled back.
“Gah!”
Barrot immediately threw the axe he’d been holding, and Kotone ducked to avoid it. Gallan used the opening to move in close for another attack. She guarded against his blade with her gauntlet, but the impact rattled her bones.
As she stumbled, Barrot quickly drew in the chain. Kotone was pulled into the air, only to stop against Bosgin’s massive fist as it crunched into her gut.
Bosgin licked his lips. “Ha ha, I hadn’t expected you to hold out this long. I really do like you. I’ll make sure to take good care of you.”
Kotone slammed into the ground. She tried to stand, but Gallan struck the back of her head with the flat of his sword, and she crumpled to the ground. Try as she might, she couldn’t force her body to move. All she could see with her barely open eyes was Bosgin staring down at her.

“Ha ha! Now I have both the Red Staff of Authority and Aries’s Hand. Even the Gods can’t stand against me!”
“Hm…but now we’ll need to swap someone out,” said Gallan, his hand on his chin in thought.
“You’re right. Barrot, let’s rock-paper-scissors for it,” said Bosgin as he held out a fist.
Barrot nodded and held his out as well.
Bosgin threw rock and Barrot threw paper. Bosgin nodded.
“Between Kotone here and the A-rank adventurers of this city, the Cup of Blood has taken quite the hit. There’s no longer as much value in keeping Bosgin around. Oh well. Given how things turned out, I don’t feel sad cutting him out now,” said Bosgin.
He brought a hand to his own throat. Kotone wondered what he was doing as she looked up at him.
He squeezed hard, and his thick neck snapped in an impossible direction. Blood, vomit, and feces poured from his body, and his eyes rolled back into his head as he collapsed to the ground. It was as if the strings that had been controlling him had been cut.
“Aah! What did you do?!” shrieked Kotone.
“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” asked Gallan.
“Just making space to welcome you, Kotone,” said Barrot.
They chuckled as they moved toward Kotone. Beset with terror, she lost consciousness.

—2—

“So someone who looks like Bosgin was spotted in the city?” I asked.
“Yeah! For some reason, he stuck around even though they already took the Red Staff of Authority,” said Bennet.
I’d run into Bennet again while I’d been hunting down the remaining Cup of Blood members. Now he was shadowing me whether I liked it or not. He’d already recovered Noelle and taken her to a safe place. That’s when he heard about Bosgin.
“…So, why didn’t you go look for Bosgin yourself? Why’d you come all this way to find me?” I asked, glaring at him.
Bennet smiled in an attempt at flattery as he grabbed my shoulder. “D-don’t be so cold, Kanata. Why don’t you just let what happened when we first met be water under the bridge?”
“Please don’t touch me.”
Bennet took his hand from my shoulder and gave me a sly wink, but then his face quickly turned serious.
“To be honest…” he said sadly, “Bosgin’s not the kind of enemy that someone like me or Noelle can handle alone. I don’t want to be an embarrassment as a knight, but if I let arrogance lead me to do something

rash, it will likely just end in a bigger disaster. Honor is important to us knights, but we're best used as a shield to protect the country. I can't let my priorities get reversed and make protecting my honor more important than protecting my country.
"Bosgin's in a whole different league. He's a real threat, and this whole situation stinks. These people could have been heroes, they could have been anything they wanted, but they're so twisted, they *want* to be murderers. And Bosgin is a murderer who leads other murderers. We have to strike him down, here and now. Defeating him will save thousands—*tens* of thousands—of victims he might brutalize in the future."
There was passion in Bennet's voice. I'd thought he was a pathetic guy with no real convictions, but I felt like he believed in what he just said.
"I'm sorry, Bennet, I'm the one who said mean things instead of focusing on the danger the city was in," I said.
"And besides, this is our last chance to get the Red Staff of Authority back! I thought it'd be impossible, but if Bosgin is still here, the staff should still be here too! No matter what else happens, if I can't get that back, my family's name will be ruined! Argh, what would my father say?!"
I facepalmed, trying to hold back my annoyance. Protecting the country aside, he had some personal issues he was still trying to work through.
"Do you really think Bosgin is still in Manaloch?" I asked.
"I'm not sure. But…it's possible that someone more dangerous is using the commotion caused by the Cup of Blood to enact their own plan. And their goals probably aren't aligned with Bosgin's."
"Someone more dangerous…?"
Bennet nodded and said, "When I got Noelle to the evacuation point, I heard that the leader of the Black Reapers…Lovis…had been spotted."
"Lovis, huh…" I tapped my chin with a finger as I thought. A moment later, an image of Lovis groveling on the ground came to mind. I felt myself frown.
"Seriously? Are you telling me you've never heard of him? He's a dangerous, battle-obsessed maniac. The reapers aren't as big as the Cup of Blood, but there are actually quite a few knights who consider them more dangerous."
"No, I know him…it's just…"
"Lovis is probably trying to outsmart Bosgin and nab the Red Staff for himself. I think Bosgin probably hasn't left Manaloch because Lovis has him pinned down. I mean, it'd be great if they kill each other, but…the problem will be if Lovis really does get his hands on the Red Staff."
"What would happen?"
"There's no telling what Lovis might do. He's not the kind of easy-to-read person who's only motivated by money. He's deranged. Even outlaws have a sort of code amongst themselves, but he doesn't follow that at all. If he's got the staff…we'll never get it back."
"Huh. I feel like he'd just give it back if I asked…"

“Kanata, this is not the time to crack jokes.” Bennet looked toward a nearby building. The roof was broken, a gaping hole in it. The buildings nearby seemed damaged.
“Bosgin was spotted in this direction,” he said.
“Looks like there was a fight. Maybe we should check it out,” I suggested.
Bennet and I exchanged glances and nodded, then approached the ruined building.
“Dammit, the door’s warped. Come on,” complained Bennet as he tried to open the door. I kicked the wall beside the door, opening a hole.
“Let’s hurry. If he’s not here, we’ll have to keep moving to catch up,” I said.
“Uh…yeah. Of course.” Bennet nodded and followed me in.
Inside was a massive man who had collapsed on the ground, covered in blood and his own filth. His neck was twisted at an impossible angle, and it was obvious he was already dead. Bennet stood there dazed, staring at the corpse.
“Bennet, is that…?”
“D-definitely… That’s Bosgin. But how did this happen…? L-Lovis must have done it…” he said fearfully.
“Oh… Do I have visitors?” came a voice as a tall man appeared from the shadows. Bennet rushed to draw his sword, but it fell from his hands the moment he saw the man.
He was wearing the same blue armor with gold patterns that Bennet wore, only slightly more ornate. He was a large man with blond hair cut in the style of a lion’s mane.
“L-Lord Gallan!” said Bennet, dumbstruck.
“Oh, Bennet! Long time no see. Ha ha, I knew you were a knight when I saw your armor, but I wasn’t expecting you. You’re starting to wear that armor well, aren’t you?” Gallan gave a friendly wave to Bennet.
“I still have a lot to learn, s-sir!” said Bennet.
“Do you know this person?” I asked, and Bennet nodded slightly. Gallan seemed happy, but Bennet’s face showed unease.
“Y-yeah… I know him, but it’s weird,” said Bennet quietly, so only I could hear. “He’s a knight among knights, one who’s been given the title of Hundred Monsters Knight. In a one-on-one fight, I’m certain he wouldn’t lose to Bosgin. But…”
“But…?”
“He… Lord Gallan disappeared three years ago. Since then, no one’s heard from him at all. I was sure he was dead.”
Bennet seemed more confused than happy about this situation. He seemed to think Gallan being alive was a very strange thing indeed.
I looked back to Gallan. He was still smiling and waving at us. For some reason, though, his smile felt artificial, and it didn’t reach his eyes.
“We should be careful of him then, you think?” I said, lowering my voice.
Bennet nodded so slightly Gallan probably couldn’t see.

“If it really is him, I don’t understand why he’d be here. To be honest, there were rumors that he was a spy for another country, but that doesn’t change the fact that he’s strong enough to be called a Hundred Monsters Knight. He’s a knight charged with killing demon kings and humanoid dragons… Bosgin and Lovis are nowhere near him.”
After speaking to me, Bennet turned back to Gallan.
“Lord Gallan… If I may ask, what have you been doing this whole time, never contacting the Royal Knights? Why have you been hiding for so long? And why are you in Manaloch now?”
“Come now, it’s been so long since we’ve seen each other, and you’re not being very friendly, Bennet.”
“I want to celebrate this reunion, and I don’t want to doubt, but…”
Gallan scratched his head. “Long ago, if I gave an order, you’d drop everything to follow me and agree with everything I said. Ha ha, well, looks like our little Bennet is all grown up.” Gallan smiled sadly.
He was looking at Bennet apologetically. I didn’t know Gallen well enough to think he was an impostor, but his movements were…*wrong*.
Gallan’s expression tensed. He walked our way and said, “I left the knights because I had something important to do. I can’t tell them what it is just yet. But maybe I can talk to you about it, Bennet.”
“Huh…?” Bennet took a step forward, drawn in by what Gallan said. I stood there, unmoving, not knowing what to do.
“The reason I lied to the knights and left… It has to do with this meat puppet, Bosgin.” Gallan pointed behind him to Bosgin’s corpse, without turning around himself.
There was something else that was bothering me. Bosgin had a lot of wounds, but none of them were from a sword. There were a lot of bruises from blunt strikes and scratch marks. Most importantly, the wound that certainly killed him was his twisted neck, not something you’d do with a blade.
I didn’t know Gallan’s fighting style, but I was sure he wasn’t the man who killed Bosgin.
“The reason I left the knights… The reason I left…” Gallan closed his eyes, his hand touched the hilt of the sword on his back. Bennet saw, and his eyes grew wide in realization. “Sorry, I can’t actually remember why.”
Gallan smiled a tense, artificial smile, then drew his longsword and thrust it toward Bennet.
“L-Lord Gallan! Why?!”
“I can’t have any more people seeing us. No telling tales…so I’ll kill the knight first, then I’ll take care of that lowly adventure over there.”
I jumped and quickly slipped between them, pushing Bennet’s shoulder to fling him backward.
“Look out!” I shouted.
“K-Kanata!”

Gallan laughed. “Huh, with that speed, you seem to be pretty high-level. But did you really think you’d go unharmed after jumping in front of a Hundred Monsters Knight?”
Gallan lunged forward and struck with his longsword. I took a step back and dodged a strike aimed at my stomach. Gallan followed up with a swift slash from the opposite side. I ducked.
He locked his eyes on me in a shocked glare. He clearly hadn’t expected me to dodge two attacks in a row…but he didn’t stop moving. Following the momentum of his sword, Gallan raised his blade to the sky.
“You surprised me…but we Hundred Monsters Knights have a sword skill to deal with an unarmed humanoid dragon. It will certainly be enough to take care of you.” Gallan pointed his sword directly at my chest. “Rakshasa Destroying Series.”
As Gallan struck out at me, I turned aside to evade. He then swiped his blade across as he leapt up, which I ducked to avoid. As he came down to the ground, Gallan followed the force of the sword to spin around and attack me from the opposite side. I stood my ground and threw a kick at his chest as he did.
“Gah!” Gallan twisted in the air and landed on his feet.
“N-not a scratch on Kanata… But Lord Gallan’s in a completely different league from the members of the Cup of Blood…” said Bennet, frozen in shock.
“If I hadn’t been wearing the armor of a Hundred Monsters Knight, I’d be dead. Who are you…? I can’t believe I don’t know about someone like you,” said Gallan, pointing his sword at me again. Sweat ran down his temple.
Just then, a crack ran through his armor. Chunks of broken metal fell to the floor. Gallan’s eyes grew wide as he looked down at the falling shards.
“Impossible… It was just a kick… This armor is a national treasure! It can withstand an attack from a dragon. How could it break so easily?!”
“Gallan-san, was it?” I said, lowering my foot. Gallan seemed to finally remember he was in the middle of a fight and hurriedly raised his sword again as I said, “Would you mind telling us everything? I don’t plan on pulling any more punches.”
Gallan’s mouth froze open, then he said, “That wasn’t your full strength?”
He was most likely around level 200. If I really went all out with a kick against him, it wouldn’t just be his armor that broke. It would end the fight in one hit. But just because there was such a huge difference in our levels didn’t mean I didn’t have to worry about him running.
I needed this man to explain the strange events happening in Manaloch.
“K-Kanata…h-how strong are you…?” Bennet’s mouth hung open as he pointed at me from behind. But he quickly shook his head and glared at Gallan. “L-Lord Gallan! Tell us everything! Why did you betray the knights?! Are you one of the ones causing the disturbance in Manaloch?!”
Gallan stood frozen for a moment, but he eventually placed a hand on his face, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

“Hee hee hee… Ah, I suppose I couldn’t get the Red Staff of Authority quite that easily. Really now, I’ve stayed hidden just so I wouldn’t run into an opponent like this. How irksome,” said Gallan, his speech pattern suddenly changed. He glared at me between the fingers of the hand that hid his face. It wasn’t just the words he used—his intonation, cadence, and the entire impression his speech gave had completely changed in the blink of an eye.
“Lord Gallan? No! I knew it! You are an imposter! Is it mental manipulation? Release Lord Gallan!” shouted Bennet.
“I’m glad this happened after I managed to secure the Red Staff. If it had been before, then I might have been defeated. Cutting it close, hm?” Gallan raised his longsword. “This isn’t a spell I like to use lightly, but I have no choice… Death Magic Level 11: Puppet Coffin!”
Jet-black magic circles appeared around where Gallan stood.

—3—

THE BLACK MAGIC CIRCLES transformed into three black coffins. They started to rattle and shake. The front coffin opened, and a person appeared from inside.
“No rest for the weary, eh?” said the man as he appeared from the black coffin. He had long hair and wore a monocle. Leather belts were strapped to every part of his body, and he was covered in all sorts of weapons: a bow, a spear, a sword, an axe.
He looked at us and smiled gently. He then took a sickle attached to a long chain from a belt and readied it for battle.
“Barrot the Dungeon Master?! Wh-where have you been?! Wh-why are you here?!” cried Bennet when he saw the long-haired man. Barrot waved back at Bennet.
“I’m flattered that a knight would have such a high evaluation of me. Ha ha, no, I’m just a sad man who enjoys a bit of dungeon diving.”
“I can’t believe I’d be forced to use Puppet Coffin twice in one day. Though, I suppose I should have been ready for an opponent like this. It’s not like *they* would let me get the Red Staff of Authority without some serious trouble,” muttered Gallan, a hand pressed to his face, though he looked at me and raised his longsword. Barrot grinned and looked at Gallan. They moved at the same time.
Puppet Coffin was death magic, but it being death magic didn’t mean that these two were necessarily dead. There were many spells within the field of death magic that took control of a living person’s mind.
“I can’t kill them…” I said.
“That seems a bit optimistic, doesn’t it?” said Barrot as he prepared to throw the counterweight. Gallan raised his sword to the sky at the same time.
“Barrier Magic Level 6: Divide!”

His sword shot out a physical slash of white light that split the floor as it came toward me. It seemed to be a spell intended to control the movements of his enemy.
I just stood there and let it hit me. The light disappeared the moment it touched me, thanks to Lunaère's robe.
"What the…?" said Gallan with a scowl.
The chain wrapped around my extended arm.
"And there I have you!" said Barrot happily.
"I'm the one who has you," I said and pulled the chain. Barrot flew through the air toward me.
"Impossible!"
I punched Barrot in the face. He sailed away in the direction he'd just come, and the force snapped the chain into pieces as he crashed into the ground.
"If you could just take a nap, please," I said.
Gallan swung his sword at my back, a huge slash with all his force behind it. I turned my arm behind me and caught the blade between my thumb and forefinger.
"Seriously?!" groaned Gallan.
He tried to pull his longsword back, but it wouldn't budge. I drew my sword with my other hand.
"Ah!"
I made one strike with the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh, and a pale blue glow filled the air. A massive gash appeared in the floor and the ceiling, following the arc of the swing. Gallan's longsword broke and evaporated, destroyed by the magic of my sword.
Gallan was flung back by the force of the impact and fell to the ground. He lay on his back, weakly extending his arms toward the ceiling.
"Th-this is too much…" he said.
I returned my sword to its sheath. Hopefully, those two wouldn't be getting back up any time soon. That would buy me some time to take care of whatever was controlling Gallan and Barrot.
"So powerful…" said Bennet from where he was hanging back behind me.
I stared at the two remaining coffins.
"How about you come out now?" I said.
The lid of one of them shook, and a pale hand came from inside, pushing the lid aside. The girl who sat up had a somewhat cold expression and black hair cut into a short bob. Her neatly cut bangs swayed as she looked at me.
"K-Kotone-san…?" I said.
"Oh…Kanata," she replied with no expression, though her tone seemed somewhat sad. She raised her fists toward me. "I'm sorry. I know I said I'd look out for you, but things have changed. I'm going to fight to kill you, so please run as fast as you can."
I steadied my breathing. I wasn't mentally prepared to see someone I knew step out of one of those boxes. There had to be some way to save her.

Maybe it was good luck that they kept Kotone alive to use her for the Puppet Coffins. I might still have a chance to save her.
“Aw, look at that… Hee hee, you two were close,” said Gallan as he stood shakily and laughed at Kotone and me.
My eyes narrowed. I’d aimed to knock him unconscious. Apparently, I held back a bit too much.
“Don’t worry. Once this fight is over, we’ll make you one of us too. Unfortunately for Mr. Bennet over there, he’s a bit too low a level. You pass with flying colors though, Kanata,” said Barrot as he stood slowly, wiping the blood from his mouth and smiling. But then his eyebrows creased, and he looked confused as he said, “Oh…but that means I’m next up to die? Gallan’s stronger than me. Kotone obviously has that fun gift skill to top it off. Hmm. Ah well.”
He smiled without a care in the world as he spoke of something terrible. It was horrifying to hear someone be so blasé about their impending death.
Barrot’s gaze dropped to his own hands, and he tossed aside the broken chain. “A shame. And I liked that thing too,” he said. “The chain’s pretty tricky to get the hang of for battle, but I had fun mastering it. You should try it out sometime, Kanata.”
I bit my lip.
I didn’t think I’d failed to judge my strikes twice in a row. It was possible Puppet Coffin was simply manipulating their thoughts to keep them from losing consciousness. It was probably abusing their bodies beyond their limits, as well.
“Gallan, use this,” said Barrot as he took a sword from the belt on his back and tossed it to Gallan. Gallan caught the sword and raised it toward me.
“Kanata, it appears that you are quite high in level. However, I have learned methods for fighting superior opponents,” the knight said. “Ha ha, if I didn’t know that much, I wouldn’t have lasted very long.”
Barrot took a knife from a belt around his leg and gently swiped it through the air to test it.
“This is my back-up poisoned knife. Not my first choice, but I’ve still got some tricks up my sleeve. Hope you’re looking forward to them.”
I looked at Barrot, Gallan, and then Kotone in order. I pushed back feelings of frustration and took a deep breath. It was going to be all right. If their minds were just being controlled, then there should be a way to save them.
“I’ll get Pomera-san to come heal you afterward, so please forgive me for this. I’m going to be a bit harder on you now,” I said.
“Ha! He’s looking down on us. That’s adorable. This kind of battle is best for getting the blood pumping. Let’s have another go, Kanata,” said Barrot confidently as his eyes narrowed in enjoyment.
I looked at the last coffin, the one in the back.
Were they still unwilling to send out their big guns? Or was the person in charge of Puppet Coffin hiding in that one?

I wasn’t entirely sure who I was going up against, but I could make a guess by piecing together clues from their actions. Most likely, Bosgin had just been a puppet, same as Gallan and Barrot. They were all under the effect of a spell that left the target’s personality intact while manipulating their actions. The plan was most likely to have the Cup of Blood attack and then steal the Red Staff of Authority while the gang acted as a distraction.
I knew that much, but there were still some things that didn’t fit together. If this person could call out Gallan and Barrot whenever they liked to send on a rampage, it should have been easy for them to steal the Red Staff from Bennet and the knights. It seemed too roundabout to get the Cup of Blood involved.
The person who cast Puppet Coffin was abnormally scared of showing themselves. The only conclusion I could come to was that they were using the Cup of Blood to hide any traces of their identity and involvement.
“Fighting the puppets won’t get me anywhere. I need to drag out the puppeteer,” I said, glaring at the final coffin.
“Dimension Pocket… Gandiva, the Celestial Bow of Fire.” A magic circle shone around Kotone’s hand, and a longbow wreathed in flames appeared from inside.
“Ooh, the bow of destruction that only high elven royalty and powerful spirits can use! I’m surprised you have something like that, but I guess it’s what one should expect from the Aries’s Hand,” gushed Barrot in surprise when he saw Kotone’s flaming bow.
“You’ll make a fine little puppet… If the spell doesn’t take while you’re alive, we have a solution for that as well,” said Gallan as he raised his borrowed sword and came at me.
Barrot followed close behind. He tried to use the opening made by Gallan to strike with the poisoned knife.
Kotone loosed an arrow from the Celestial Bow of Fire. I ducked to avoid the streak of flame, and the arrow struck the wall behind me. The missile melted through the stone, and it continued to fly into the city. Flames licked the edges of the hole and quickly spread.
“Th-that’s a magic weapon of mass destruction! That’s not something you can just go firing all over town!” protested Bennet to no avail. It seemed both Barrot and Kotone weren’t pulling any punches; they were going for a strategy that could potentially overwhelm a higher-level opponent’s defenses.
“Spirit Magic Level 5: Will-o’-Wisps!” cried Gallan, and a magic circle appeared around him. The light coalesced and formed two more Gallans. My senses told me they weren’t mere illusions. Since he knew that magic attacks wouldn’t get through, he needed spells that would deal physical attacks.
“Not going to make this easy,” I sighed.
I could tell by their movements that they knew I was higher level. They switched to strategies that were more roundabout—ones that had high

burst firepower or ones that kept them at an advantage. It suggested they had far more fighting experience than Evil Priest Notts or the demon king Mother had.
The Gallans came slashing at me from three different directions at once. Kotone timed an arrow to match and let it loose toward me. But it looked like she didn't care at all if her arrow hit Gallan, as long as she hit me.
"You won't be able to handle this! No matter how high your level is, you won't escape uninjured if you're hit by the Celestial Bow of Fire!" shouted Gallan.
I opened my senses to the flow of magic and determined which of the Gallans were the fakes. Leveling two strong kicks at the doppelgangers put them out of the fight quickly—their bodies split in two, tumbled over the ground, and turned back into light.
Then I swept my leg to trip the real Gallan. He fell hard, his shoulder crashing into the ground. I felt bad, but I quickly followed up by snapping his legs. I didn't want him back in the fight, and Pomera should be able to undo the damage once things were sorted out.
"I-I can't keep up at all… This is madness!" groaned Gallan. "But you can't evade arrows from the Celestial Bow of Fire!"
I might not be able to evade them, but they also weren't much of a danger to me. As one shot toward me, I caught it with my hand. The red flames were about to explode, but I covered them and crushed the arrowhead in my fist. Flames spurted from between my fingers, and I put them out by waving my hand. Gallan's eyes grew wide as he stared in disbelief.
I grabbed Barrot's arm and held it back as he tried to stab me from where he'd been hidden behind Gallan. The blade stopped just before my face. Barrot pushed his hand forward, but he couldn't move my arm.
That's when I noticed the knife's black blade was shivering and a purple light was beginning to leak from along the edges.
"That isn't poison," I said.
"You truly are formidable, Kanata…but this is the end." Barrot smiled.
It wasn't just the knife. Several of the weapons strapped to Barrot were shaking and shining purple.
I'd seen this in Cocytus. It was called agniraz—an explosive made by demons that could be detonated with a magic command.
"A poisoned knife wasn't going to do anything against someone like you. Sorry, but you'll have to die with me. As we stand now, everyone but Kotone will perish. But that's the price that must be paid!" Barrot dropped the knife and wrapped his arms around me.
"K-Kanata!" cried Bennet.
"Run Bennet!"
Time was running out, so I focused my speed and strength to strip the weapons from Barrot's belts. One by one, they fell to the ground, then I scooped up the adventurer in one arm and the knight in the other. A few moments later, I cleared the blast zone just as they detonated.

When the agniraz exploded, it formed a massive black pillar of fire. The floor burned, and nearby walls shattered.
“That was close…” I said with an exhausted huff.
I dropped the two puppets to the ground. They were more of a danger to themselves than they were to me, so I snapped all the joints in their arms and legs while mentally apologizing to Pomera.
“You’re…invincible…” said Bennet, shrinking away from me.
“I hoped it wouldn’t come to this,” said a muffled voice, high-pitched like a child’s. “I wished to avoid standing out, to avoid drawing *their* gaze, but…it seems that is no longer an option.”
The final coffin opened. A young blonde girl emerged and walked over to stand beside Kotone.
She wore a black-and-blue dress with a ribboned headband. Her cute outfit didn’t match her evil aura. There was a cold-hearted glint to her world-weary eyes. She gnawed on her finger in annoyance as she glared at Bennet and me.
The aura the girl gave off had an air of inhuman magic. It was close to the feeling I got from Lunaère.
Held in her right hand was a bright red staff.

—4—

“I HAD HOPED to take you off guard and finish you off with the agniraz explosion. I’m surprised you avoided it,” said the blonde girl as she chewed her fingertip until it was raw.
The way she spoke, the way she moved…it was all the same as when Gallan’s personality had been overridden. At least now I knew who the puppet master was.
Bennet’s face twisted in disbelief when he saw the girl. “Corpse Doll Alice?!”
I glanced at the knight. Apparently, she was famous in Locklore—but as usual, this was news to me.
“You don’t know about her?” asked Bennet when I looked at him blankly.
“Corpse Doll Alice is a magic user who became a lich. It’s said the real Alice could single-handedly stand against an entire country if she wanted. She’s about as strong as humanoid dragons can get!”
“A lich, huh?”
That did make sense. The aura coming from her was similar to Lunaère’s. And she seemed a little young to have that high a level.
“But… Alice was killed eighty years ago. No one’s seen anything of her since!” exclaimed Bennet.
Since she had Puppet Coffin, that explained where she’d been hiding out. Though, if she was strong enough to take on an entire country by herself, I couldn’t imagine *why* she’d been lying low.

Once someone became a lich, time lost most of its meaning. It was true for Lunaère—just decades and centuries with nothing to do but study magic, gain levels, and goof off with hobbies.
Meaning…I might have just bitten off more than I could chew. I guessed Lunaère was over level 5,000. What was Alice's level? I needed to know if I could handle this on my own or if I needed to go find Philia for backup.
"Status check!"

ALICE AZCAROLL
Race: Lich
Lv: 666
HP: 2997/2997
MP: 2687/3396

That's it…?! That's what qualifies as a high-level humanoid dragon?!
I'd thought she would at least be a higher level than Mother, who was almost level 1,000.
Apparently Lunaère wasn't powerful because she was a lich, she was powerful because she was *Lunaère*.
"R-run, Kanata! Alice is in a completely different league. We've got to find a way to report back to the royal family! Forget about the Red Staff! This is the end for Manaloch!" shouted Bennet, his eyes filled with dread as he tugged desperately on my arm.
I shook him off gently.
"I'll manage. You should get out of here, Bennet. It'll be easier if there aren't any bystanders," I said.
"St-stop being so casual about this! I know you're far stronger than I am, but Alice is a legend! This isn't a Hundred Monsters Knight or a Dungeon Master; this is a whole different level!" he said as he drew his sword and steadied his nerves. "I'm a knight. I-I can do this! I'd draw her attention on the count of three. You run back as fast as you can. A-at least this way, even the royal family can't blame me for the Red Staff. Tell my father…I died like a knight."
"No, really… Bennet, get out of here." I appreciated his feelings, but this was going to be an easy fight for me as long as I didn't have to worry about protecting innocent lives.
"You don't trust me? H-hah, I get things done when I need to. T-trust me," he continued.
"Oh…yes. Travelers can see their opponents' levels, can't they, Kanata? From what I've seen of you so far, I'm probably not much of a challenge to you," said Alice, her expression fierce.
Bennet looked shocked as he stared at Alice, then turned back to look at me.

She continued, “I don’t know why someone as terrifying as you appeared out of the blue. I was going out of my way to settle this peacefully… But know that you are a *bug*.”
“A bug?” It seemed like a strange thing to call someone many times more powerful than her.
“Hee hee, don’t think you’re the first. There have been others like you. You’re very rare, but incredibly high-level people like you appear from time to time. It’s mostly when a special gift skill malfunctions. In the past, other travelers called those people ‘bugs in the system’.”
“Ahh, that kind of ‘bug.’ That’s just—”
“I imagine the gods hate you more than most.” Alice’s face split in a terrible grin, revealing her jagged teeth. A long, reddish tongue hung from the corner of her mouth, her cuteness subsumed by evil.
A shiver ran down my spine. Alice clearly knew a lot about Naiarotop and the other gods, and there was clearly something I was missing. Alice knew I was a far higher level than her, but her confidence hadn’t faltered.
“Hee hee, let me explain, sad little boy. The higher beings do everything they can to reduce the interference by bugs as much as possible. History keeps repeating itself…and the bugs always lose. If you truly attempt to interfere and make a nuisance of yourself, they will kill you along with the rest of the world.”
I gulped.
Naiarotop’s responsibility was to maintain this twisted world and was most likely trying to control the number of high-level people to maintain balance. They would surely be thinking of ways to handle me, the person who’d gained more than 4,000 levels despite being thrown into a dungeon to die as a joke. I wasn’t just an annoyance to them—I’d become an obvious threat.
“So the obvious reason why it was so easy for me to get both the Red Staff of Authority and Aries’s Hand?” Alice stepped onto a pile of debris and licked Kotone’s cheek. “It’s simple, Kanata. This is what the gods had planned from the start.”

Chapter 5:
The Red Staff of Authority

—1—

"NOW THEN, Aries's Hand…take this." Alice pressed the bright red staff into Kotone's hands. "You should be able to wield the power of the spirit in it so well that its former owner will be put to shame."
When Kotone took the staff, her shoulders shook violently and she pressed a hand to her head.
"…There's a voice…in the staff…in my head. I don't know the language, but I understand," she muttered, her eyes vacant.
"Kotone-san…?" I asked.
Her actions had been uneven when she was controlled by Alice, but it seemed the Red Staff was adding an extra layer of interference.
"So, you can speak with it?" Alice clapped her hands together with glee. "Hee hee! That's better than I expected!
I was right to have high expectations for you. While the higher beings might have been involved, the royal family really is full of idiots for letting a hero have something like this without knowing its true nature. The time of hiding in the shadows is over!"
Alice laughed in satisfaction. "Now, Aries's Hand, my dear…do it! Show us the overwhelming power of the weapon that single-handedly brought a world to its knees!"
Kotone raised the Red Staff.
"Fire Magic Level 15: Agni's Rage."
Magic circles appeared around Kotone. Alice looked around and her expression went blank for a moment, but then her disgusting shark-toothed grin quickly returned.
"Amazing! Incredible, Aries's hand! Your casting level has surpassed that of any mortal! Now that you have full control of the Red Staff of Authority, you are truly among the ranks of the gods!"
Alice's shrill cackle rang out, and massive balls of fire appeared from the magic circles—each one in the shape of a rage-filled human face. In the blink of an eye, they swarmed through the building.
"Wh-what, what is happening? Is this hell?!" cried Bennet, standing there frozen. His sword dropped to the ground as he realized that he should have taken my advice to run.
Kotone lowered the Red Staff, and the fiery faces came rushing at us.
"Foolish boy. If you had just behaved, the higher beings wouldn't have panicked and I wouldn't have come to destroy you," cackled Alice.
I pointed the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh toward the ceiling.
"Fire Magic Level 20: Apocalypse."

A red magic circle appeared, and flames poured out to form the shape of a dragon. It flew around swallowing up the balls of fire before breaking through the building's walls, destroying the ceiling, and flying away into the sky.
"A level 15 spell won't cut it," I said, and Alice glared at me. Her face was frozen in a stiff grin.
"Wh-what happened? I'm alive…? What… Was I saved?" said Bennet, crouched on the ground at my feet.
"Please, just give up," I said, taking a step toward Alice as she retreated backward. "That staff can't beat me. Kotone-san isn't your tool. Please release her right now and we can end this peacefully."
"I-Impossible… How? How could a new traveler like you get power like that…?"
"Or I can kill you. Would that release her?" I asked as I pointed my sword at Alice. Her eyes locked onto the blade like she couldn't believe what she was seeing.
There were many spells within the domain of death magic that were complicated to use. Kotone should still be alive…but her soul had been stolen by Alice. It could break Kotone if I killed Alice without banishing the spell first. I needed to do everything I could to capture Alice alive.
"So…so that's how it is. He he he, aah ha ha! So that's how cursed you are by the gods!" said Alice. She bit down on her finger as if trying to push down her own terror. Blood trickled down her hand and stained the fabric at her wrist as her shoulders shook in fear. "So be it! Aries's Hand! Release the spirit from its seals within the Red Staff of Authority! Do it!"
At Alice's cry, Kotone pointed the Red Staff up through the shattered ceiling. A crimson light poured out, turning the area around Kotone red.
What now?!
I raised my sword to the sky.
A gigantic…*thing* appeared in midair. It was colored the same garish red as the Red Staff and was shaped like a pillar of stone with an old man's face. The face was expressionless, his eyes shut tight underneath a crown with a cross on his head. It was sort of like a massive chess piece, and it was warping the space around it.
"What *is* that…?" I asked, baffled by the thing floating over our heads.
"Hee hee, I knew that even you would be frightened. Yes? It even scares me. Behold the Red King…said to have been used by the higher beings to destroy another world in the past. It is a spirit of the greatest evil. *This* is what they had lying around in their treasure room, forgotten and covered in dust. They sent it out into the world carried by some pathetic weaklings. Isn't it *magnificent*?" said Alice, her mouth like a gaping tear in her pale face as she laughed.
"A monster that destroyed an entire world…? K-Kanata, is that a spirit…? Is *that* really a spirit?" said Bennet as he tugged fearfully on the hem of my robe.

“I don’t know…but I’m a bit relieved it’s not one of the demons from the mirror,” I replied.
“M-mirror? What are you talking about?!”
I glanced at my magic bag. For one terrible moment, I’d thought that a demon had somehow escaped from the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm.
I used Status Check.

Race: Red King
Lv: 3227
HP: 19685/19685
MP: 16780/18780

After checking the status, I gulped. “It’s pretty strong! It’s not good that it’s hovering over the middle of the city.”
“*Pretty* strong…?” said Bennet, looking at me questioningly.
“Aries’s Hand! Call the Red King back here! It can’t protect us from that distance!” shouted Alice at Kotone.
“I…I can’t control it,” replied Kotone.
“What?!” Just as Alice screamed, a crack ran through the Red Staff that Kotone still held aloft. Then it shattered.
The Red King was out of control.
A seething crimson light shone from the Red King. Magic circle after magic circle appeared from its body, accompanied by a grating, mechanical sound. It was some sort of language that I couldn’t understand, but it signaled that something was about to happen…
Bright red cubes appeared in the sky, at least 30 feet across on each side. Then they began to tumble down onto the building we were in.
“Do you plan to destroy me as well? I released you from your imprisonment! Does it lack intelligence? No… It simply has no interest in humans. Aries’s Hand, protect me!”
Following Alice’s command, Kotone raised her hand into the air.
“Dimension Pocket… Albion, Shield of the White King!”
A heavy white shield that looked like a chunk of stone appeared in Kotone’s hand.
“Not many spells I can use at this distance,” I mumbled as I pointed my sword toward the sky and formed magic circles. “Fire Magic Level 20: Apocalypse.”
The flaming dragon that burst from the tip of my sword climbed skyward, destroying cubes as it went. It closed in on the Red King and swung its claws. But its flaming talons stopped just before they touched the stone spirit. The fiery dragon kept trying to rake its claws into the Red King, to no avail.
“Hee hee! Too bad! A barrier completely defends the Red King against magic. Its power is incredible,” said Alice.

So, the Red King was immune to magic because it could warp space. I began to wonder if a level 20 spell would be high enough to do the job. But just then, the Apocalypse dragon's claws pushed past the barrier and smashed into the Red King. The eyes of the old man's face snapped open, and its mouth gaped. A huge crack ran across its side, and flames spewed out.
"Its eyes can open…?" murmured Alice.
The fiery dragon roared and dissipated into the sky, seemingly satisfied with its attack.
"But…the Red King is immune to magic…" said Alice, as she stared up in a stupor.
It seemed that the Red King was magic-resistant…not magic-*proof*. A direct hit from Apocalypse would have instantly killed a demon of the same level, but this spirit was still going strong. On top of that, it was difficult to fight against it while it was flying around freely up in the sky.
More red cubes came raining down.
"This looks bad. Bennet-san, hide behind me," I said.
"Okay!" replied Bennet as he ducked down.
I struck with the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh, cutting a red cube. It split in half, then dissolved into particles of light and dust that floated through the air. Two more followed behind it, and I dispatched them as well.
"…Are those really that dangerous? They're breaking into sand," said Bennet from behind me, slowly raising his head.
A smaller cube plummeted toward Alice and Kotone. The heavy white shield that Kotone held over their heads broke to pieces the moment the cube touched it, and the impact cracked the walls and floor, burying Alice and Kotone in debris.
I heard Alice scream as she disappeared, but I couldn't see Kotone at all through the cloud of dust.
"Kotone-san!"
I couldn't let Alice die until I got her to undo Puppet Coffin.
Should I go save them…?
No, the Red King was aiming for me and wreaking havoc on Manaloch. The longer the fight dragged on, the more damage it would cause to the city. Right now, I needed to defeat that thing as quickly as possible.
The Red King was similar in strength to the powerful demons from the Cursed Mirror—that in itself was plenty dangerous. I'd defeated so many demons while under Lunaère's protection that I could recognize their weaknesses, attacks, and even thought processes. I didn't have that advantage with the Red King.
I might even be killed if I took a direct hit. But if I spent too long being cautious as I fought, the city would take more damage and it might be too late to save Kotone. This needed to end quickly.
"L-Look, Kanata! You did it!" said Bennet happily.

Wondering what he was talking about, I focused on the Red King and felt the blood drain from my face.
“It’s running away!” cheered Bennet.
He was right, the Red King was rising at absurd speeds. I hadn’t expected it to retreat after the one hit from Apocalypse.
The demons in the Cursed Mirror always attacked and never retreated. I’d assumed that all monsters of that level did that, but the Red King was soaring higher by the second.
This wasn’t something to celebrate. If what Alice said was true, it was an evil spirit that had once destroyed an entire world before being sealed away in that staff.
If a level 1,000 demon king was enough to create an uproar, I couldn’t imagine what disaster this was going to cause.

—2—

“Bennet-san, I’ve got to finish this,” I said.
“Sure, of course. Now that thing is gone, Alice is the only threat. I’m sure you can do something about that witch!”
I shook my head. “No, I’ve got to defeat the Red King, not Alice.”
“Huh?! B-but… I-It ran away, right?”
“I’m going after it, but I’ll be back.”
“R-right, so you’re going to…” Bennet looked up into the sky in confusion.
The problem was that the Red King had fled high into the sky. With its barrier, it wouldn’t be effective to cast spells at it from a distance.
There were spells like Fluegel to manipulate the winds and fly through the sky, but they weren’t good for fine control. And, of course, there was no footing in the air, so it was hard to get into a proper fighting stance. Not ideal conditions to fight an enemy like this.
“Maybe I can ride Wol,” I said to myself.
“Wol…? What’s that?” asked Bennet suspiciously.
“He’s a dog spirit. He’s sweet.” Lunaère had mentioned once that most spirits had the ability to fly. And Wol lived in Yggdrasil, so being able to fly probably was handy there.
“Can you really fight against that thing?”
I raised the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh and said, “Summoning Magic Level 18: Wolzottl.”
A magic circle appeared and a ten-foot-tall beast with vibrant blue fur stepped out of the center. His golden eyes looked at me, then shifted to Bennet as his two tails slowly wagged.
Opening his mouth to bare huge fangs, saliva spilled down and hit the floor and formed steaming puddles wherever it dripped. Bennet’s eyes opened wide, and a deep crease formed between his eyebrows as he stared in shock at Wolzottl.

“Awooo!”
Wolzottl rushed at me in excitement. I sheathed my sword and spread my arms, hugging Wol as he tackled me. He flopped to the ground, and I pet his cheek.
“I’m sorry, Wol, but I’ve got another request for you,” I said.
“Awoo, woof! Yip, yip!” Wol rubbed his face against my hand.
He quickly relaxed when I pulled my hand back. His head drooped in disappointment, then he looked at me and seemed to sense the severity of the situation. He stopped whining and fell silent.
I looked up to the sky and the Red King. Wolzottl followed my gaze and looked up as well.
“I want you to help me chase after that. Can you help me?” I asked.
“Unf.” Wol nodded.
“Wh-what kind of monster have you made a contract with?” asked Bennet, backing away to put space between him and Wol. He looked very wary, and his hand instinctively moved toward the hilt of his sword.
“He’s a good dog, Bennet,” I said.
“You’re a madman…”
I climbed onto Wol’s back, and he leapt into the sky. He ran through the air vertically while I held on for dear life, and soon we were visibly gaining on the Red King.

“We’ll catch up with it in no time!” I shouted into the wind.
But the Red King noticed us. The carved face grimaced, and it climbed faster. The spirit seemed desperate.
“For a being made of stone, it changes expressions so quickly…”
The fact that it launched a series of attacks, then ran the moment it sensed it was at a disadvantage, made it seem like a run-of-the-mill monster, not at all like the world-killer description Alice gave.
Magic circles appeared around the Red King and countless red cubes dropped at us from above.
I swung the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh and split the cubes, but the Red King used the opportunity to climb higher.
“Well then, how about this?!” I said, pointing my sword at the Red King’s head. “Spacetime Magic Level 18: Gravity Bomb!”
A patch of dark light grew above the Red King’s head, expanding in space before suddenly contracting. The Red King dropped toward me to avoid the spell.
While it might have a strong resistance to magic, it didn’t seem like it wanted to take a direct hit from a Gravity Bomb. The barrier seemed to defend against magic by warping space, and I wondered if it was weak against spacetime spells that had a similar effect.
Regardless, that let us close the distance. I slashed apart another red cube, and Wol quickly moved in close to the Red King so I could let loose a slash from the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh.
A gash appeared on the bridge of the old man’s nose, and its expression contorted in pain. The Red King glared at me resentfully.
Wolzottl moved to keep me facing the stone spirit.
“Sorry, Wol, this is taking longer than I expected,” I said.
Numerous magic circles appeared in the air again, but I was above the spirit now—it had nowhere to run and it couldn’t drop things on me. It was time to finish it off.
The Red King’s expression suddenly flipped from resentment to what looked like mocking amusement. It narrowed its eyes cruelly.
A rain of bright red cubes spread to cover Manaloch as they fell.
No! It’s targeting the city!
“Wol, drop down!” I shouted.
The Red King laughed uncontrollably.
I’d been thinking of the Red King as more like an unthinking natural disaster than a monster, but I was wrong. The Red King was concentrated evil that relied on nasty tricks.
I used the Twin Minds Method to cast two copies of the same spell.
“Fire Magic Level 20: Apocalypse!”
Two fiery dragons appeared and raced through the sky, circling outward to destroy the cubes the Red King had released. I slashed apart the ones that slipped through while Wol flew to intercept them.

A few moments later, I slashed out with my sword and destroyed the final cube that the Red King had thrown out.
We'd managed to prevent it from destroying the city, but it looked like trying to gain an altitude advantage was problematic. If I went high, it could simply attack innocent people below to force me back down again.
"Showing your true colors now that you're cornered?" I yelled.
I readied my blade and turned back to the Red King just in time to see another cube flying toward Wolzottl. When we were distracted, it had taken the opportunity to unleash a single, well-aimed attack.
"Wol, retreat!" I shouted, and Wol fell back.
I slashed out with my sword and destroyed the cube, but a second, significantly smaller cube was following immediately in its wake.
I swung my sword back quickly, but not fast enough. A sharp corner of the cube struck my stomach. I retched and spat out saliva mixed with blood before I tossed the cube aside and broke it with a thrust of my sword.
"Woof…" Wol looked back at me with worry in his eyes.
"I'm all right. It wasn't that much damage." But I was running out of time. It had figured out a way to whittle me down, and I couldn't give it that opportunity.
"Let's finish it off before it drops more of those cubes. We can avoid another attack like that if we can take it out before it's done casting."
Wolzottl nodded in response and leapt through the air, closing in immediately with the Red King.
The spirit hesitated for a moment, then started firing off single cubes at me. I slashed them to pieces with my sword, and desperation filled the Red King's eyes as I conjured another Gravity Bomb, forcing it to drop altitude. If I could just get a little closer!
Suddenly, there was a red cube in my path. The spirit's expression looked relieved, like it thought this would finally do the trick.
"Punch through, Wol! We can't let this go on any longer!"
Wol advanced straight on. The cube struck me and I felt my ribs crack, but I flung it to the side and pierced it with my sword to destroy it. I couldn't worry about injuries now.
The Red King ground its teeth and started forming magic circles far below. When the cubes fell, they would destroy the city…but I wasn't going let that happen. We just needed to get a little closer.
"That's it, Wol!" Then I shouted at the Red King, "You ran the moment you saw I could defeat you, then attacked the innocent to cover your retreat… That's not how a king acts! You're nothing but a pawn!"
I sliced down with the Heroic Sword of Gilgamesh. A vertical line ran through the Red King, and the two halves of its body started to slide apart, the old man's face frozen in shock. Fine cracks rushed through the red stone as it crumbled away from the sword's power.
In the center, a red sphere hovered where the spirit had been.
"Is that the Red King's core…?"

The sphere expanded, then suddenly contracted as it turned black.
Realization struck me—it looked like a Gravity Bomb before it exploded.
It's going to self-destruct?!
That explained Alice's taunts that Naiarotop intentionally planned this out to finish me off. I bit my lip.
"Woof…?" Wolzottl looked up at me anxiously.
"Thanks for your help, Wol. I'll manage the rest on my own."
"Woof!" Wolzottl barked in protest but disappeared, fading away in a flash of light as I sent him back to the spirit realm.
His level was lower than mine, and I might not be able to save him if he were hit by the explosion. I could probably avoid an instant death, and I had a plan to get out of this.
"Spacetime Magic Level 12: Slow World!" I formed a magic circle as I fell away, and a purple light encased the Red King's core.
The spell slowed the flow of time for everything inside the area of effect. It wasn't usually convenient to use in battle, but it could buy me time before the core exploded. I poured most of my remaining magic into the spell and cast it as powerfully as I could. I hoped that would give me the opportunity to teleport away and put distance between me and the core.
Good thing it was way up here. Who knew what sort of damage the Red King's self-destruct would cause if it happened in town?
Using the Twin Minds Method, I began to chain cast a series of Short Gates, escaping toward the ground. Slow World would help, but I still didn't know how long I had. Better to cast Short Gates in quick succession to put some distance between me and the core than risk taking the time to cast long-distance teleportation.
"Barrier Magic Level 26: Return to Nothing." From nowhere in particular, I heard the faint sound of a voice, and a black magic circle overlapped the Red King's core.
The purple light of Slow World dissipated.
"Huh…?"
I didn't understand what had happened. All I knew was that someone had nullified my Slow World.
It wasn't Alice. She couldn't use spells of that level. Neither could the Red King, and he was dead anyway.
Besides Lunaère, I'd never seen anyone use a level 26 spell. And this definitely wasn't her.
Only then did I realized that I recognized that voice.
The Red King's core exploded, and my vision was swallowed in crimson flames.

THE EXPANDING FIREBALL rushed at me. I stopped forming the magic circle for the Short Gate and repurposed the circle to cast Dimension Pocket instead. I pulled out the Cursed Mirror of the Warped Realm and hid behind it.

It was a desperate move. My first thought was that if the Mirror was strong enough to seal away all those demons, then it should be strong enough to withstand the Red King's self-destruct blast.

My second thought was that I might have just made a mistake that would damage the mirror and unleash hell into Locklore.

There was no third thought, because suddenly it felt like I got punched by a gargantuan fist made of hellfire. Flames rushed around me, and I slammed into the ground. I'd been pretty high up, but it only took a few moments to fall to earth. My shoulder slammed into the debris of a smashed building, and the impact left a deep crater in the ground.

I groaned and looked at the Cursed Mirror, then let out a sigh of relief. The demons were still sealed away.

Then I coughed violently, and black smoke puffed from my mouth. As expected, I'd taken an insane amount of damage, but—*somehow*—I was alive. Saved by the Cursed Mirror.

"K-Kanata, you made it!" said Bennet as he ran over.

"Yeah, somehow…" I replied with a pained smile.

I tried to stand, but my legs were too weak. The damage was affecting me more than I'd expected. I looked down at my body expecting to see Lunaère's Robe covered in soot, but it was perfectly clean. I sighed in relief again.

"Don't push yourself!" ordered Bennet before turning to shout, "Hey, you there! Adventurer! Don't stand there staring like a moron, go get a white mage!"

After everything that happened, I'd started to think that Bennet had gotten an attitude adjustment. But it seemed his superiority complex toward adventurers was still alive and well.

"Worry about that later. What about Kotone-san and the other people being controlled?" I asked Bennet, just as someone leapt at me from behind and wrapped their arms around me. It seemed a small child had been hiding in the shadows of the rubble.

No…they were far too strong to be a child.

I looked behind me to see jagged teeth set in a wide mouth and eyes that gleamed with insane excitement. A tongue stretched out to lick my cheek.

"Corpse Doll Alice!" shouted Bennet as he stumbled away from us.

The right half of Alice's body was almost entirely crushed, and she was covered in blood from being hit with one of the Red King's cubes. Even so, she was making great use of her remaining physical strength. To make matters worse, she was now stronger than I was after all the damage I'd just taken.

“Hee hee hee, ahh ha ha! Surprised? Don’t worry, you can still go adventuring even after you are controlled by Puppet Coffin. You let your guard down, didn’t you?” said Alice, then she bit my neck. My flesh split and blood flowed.
I gulped. She might only be level 666, but she had enough power to kill me right now.
“I can’t believe you managed to defeat the Red King!” continued Alice. “Ah ha ha! Too bad for you—now I can make you mine! I’ve lost the Red Staff of Authority, but I’ve gained something even more powerful. As long as I have your strength, I can become one of the Unseen Hands of the Gods!”
“Unseen hands…?” I repeated.
“Don’t worry, my dear. I’ll let you stay close to your precious Kotone for all eternity. Well, you’ll have the illusion of that, anyway.”
Alice’s long tongue ran over my neck, savoring my blood as she planned to make me one of her puppets.

This was bad. I had the Ouroboros Ring, so I would be immediately resurrected if she killed me, but it used a lot of my magic and only brought me back to life at minimum HP. And since I was captured, she could just keep killing me until my magic ran out. Besides, Alice was planning to make me her puppet. I might not even get a chance to use the power of the Ouroboros Ring.
“Y-you’re not so tough now! I’m not afraid of you! I’ll take you out, here and now!” shouted Bennet as he readied his sword and came at Alice.
“B-Bennet-san!”
Alice looked at Bennet with disinterest. She was pretty banged up and probably being kept alive by death magic. Her stats were greatly reduced, other than her strength. But…
“I don’t think you can handle this, Bennet-san! I appreciate you wanting to help, but don’t do something reckless…” I said.
“…You make people want to prove they *can* do something,” said Bennet with a grimace. But his expression quickly turned serious, and he launched his sword’s sheath at Alice.
Alice grabbed the scabbard, and Bennet attacked. Her eyes opened wide as Bennet brought his sword down and the blade slashed across her head. She was flung back, thrown heavily off balance.
“I-Impossible… How could someone like you…” started Alice. Bennet had a smile on his pale face, but it quickly turned to fear as Alice said, “How could someone like you manage to get a hit in?”
“It’s a distraction technique. Kind of a one-off, but surprisingly effective. I can get things done when I need to!”
A huge wound was left across Alice’s face, but she didn’t seem bothered by it at all. She swung her arm wildly and flung Bennet away.
“Ah ha ha! Too bad for you, poor little knight! You might have been able to defeat me if your level were just a little higher!” mocked Alice.
I heard footsteps behind me. I turned back to see Pomera, her staff raised high. It looked like it’d seen better days as it was roughly wrapped in bandages to hold it together.
“Hi-yah!” The strike crunched into the back of Alice’s skull, and the staff broke in half again.
I wondered why Pomera was there, then remembered Bennet ordering a passerby to go get a white magic user.
Alice lay with her temple pressed to the ground, staring at me and reaching out with a trembling hand.
“Hee…hee… I’ll give you a warning, Kanata. The higher beings have turned their attention toward you. Sooner or later, you will come to a tragic end. And it won’t only be you who gets dragged down. That is why I have lived my life walking the path they laid out for me.”
Alice’s hand lost its strength and fell to the ground. Puppet Coffin could only animate the target until the moment they died.

She was gone for good. Her spells were broken, but would it be too late for the people she controlled?
Are Kotone and the others all right…?
“I-I wasn’t really thinking when I did that. That was the right thing to do, wasn’t it?” asked Pomera fearfully.
“Yes, thank you, Pomera-san. I was in real danger there, and you saved me,” I said.
Killing Alice was the only option. Even injured to the point of incapacitation, she would use all her magic to force herself back into action. It would be impossible to capture her alive.
“H-hey, Kanata… I-I helped too, right? That girl had an opening to attack because I was here,” said Bennet, moving slowly after his own brush with death.
“I’m…very grateful, Bennet-san. I’ll be even more grateful if you save Kotone-san and the others. They were probably buried when the building collapsed.”

—4—

POMERA CAST multiple white magic spells on me until I was in a state where I could at least move.
As she healed me, she gave me the news. The attack on the city had already been resolved. The majority of the Cup of Blood members who attacked Manaloch were captured or killed, and the rest had fled. While Bennet and I chased after the Red Staff of Authority, she had led the efforts to help the injured. There were quite a few sightings throughout the city of Cup of Blood members standing stunned in fear until they were captured. It seemed Philia had done some good work too.
I told her how Kotone had been captured by Alice. The lich had assumed that would slow the response against the Cup of Blood, but it seemed that she hadn’t planned on running into me.
Once we talked, Pomera went back to the healing center to make up for the shortage of white magic users. I got Bennet to help me, and we found Kotone, Hundred Monsters Gallan, and Barrot the Dungeon Master.
They were alive, but they didn’t seem to be waking up.
It was bad. I couldn’t follow the proper steps to release them from Alice’s Puppet Coffin. The horrific spell had trapped their souls and overwrote their consciousnesses to turn them into unwilling—and now unconscious—slaves. I’d hoped to force Alice to release them, but now it seemed they might never wake.
The three of them received treatment at the healing center for half a day, but they still didn’t wake up. After that, we moved them to the research facilities in the Mithril Wand to be placed under the care of experts.

The day after the incident, Pomera, Philia, Bennet, and I went to visit them. All three were still in their beds, as still as the dead.
“I must apologize, Kanata,” said Garnet with a deep bow of his head. “You relied on us, but… We still haven’t found a cure. We are searching, of course…but we should keep our expectations realistic.”
I bit my lip, and my shoulders slumped. To be honest, that was the answer I’d been expecting.
Lunaère had taught me a bit about death magic, so I was actually more confident in the depth of my own knowledge than that of the people at the Mithril Wand. Even so, I had no clue where to start.
When no one was looking, I made Kotone drink a Blood Ether of the Gods. It had no effect.
“According to the experts, their consciousnesses have been mixed up and are connected randomly. Setting them right would be like going out in a storm in a desert to gather torn pages from a spell book. Treatment may not be possible,” said Garnet.
When Bennet heard that, he placed his hands on the rails of the bed that Gallan was lying in and burst into tears over his beloved mentor.
“Lord Gallan, Lord Gallan! I finally found you after you’d been missing for so long… I thought we could save you, but now…”
“I’m sorry… If I hadn’t struck that humanoid dragon girl with my staff…” said Pomera.
If anyone was at fault, though, it was me. If I had conserved more of my strength for after the fight with the Red King, I wouldn’t have been captured by Alice. I could have captured her instead.
And it was also likely that Naiarotop and the higher gods arranged for Alice to come to the city of Manaloch to kill me. No, it wasn’t just likely—it was almost certain.
Someone had interfered when I tried to delay the Red King’s explosion. That voice…I could never forget it. It was Naiarotop.
Naiarotop was seriously coming to kill me. Alice wasn’t lying. She said that the Red Staff of Authority incident was the higher gods’ scheme from the start and that I had no way of running from them. And the damage would extend beyond me.
I squeezed my fists.
Did I even have a chance to fight back? If they were coming after me—if the damage was going to affect those around me—I couldn’t just stand there in silence and let them take me out. I had to find the power to stand against them.
“Kanata…?” said Pomera, suddenly worried since I’d fallen silent.
I shook my head and said, “I was just thinking.” I turned to face Garnet.
“Garnet-san, I’m also going to look for a way to revive Kotone-san and the others. I don’t care if it takes a lifetime, I will find a way. While I do that, could you please take care of them here? I’ll find a way to pay for their treatment.”

“You and Kotone got along well, didn’t you?” Garnet murmured, then smiled sadly. He also seemed fond of Kotone, so he probably heard that Kotone and I had been talking. “Kotone has done much for me as well. We’ll take good care of her. Don’t concern yourself with money. And…I have something I’d like to discuss with you. Would you accompany me to another room?”
He looked serious as he spoke. I had no idea what he wanted to talk about, but I had no reason to decline. I nodded.
I followed Garnet to what looked like a meeting room, and we sat face-to-face. One of Garnet’s workers left a tray with black tea and a large envelope on the table. I wondered what was inside.
“Kanata… I of course have no intention of taking Kotone’s treatment lightly. However, the unfortunate truth is that she is unlikely to regain consciousness.”
“I…understand that.”
“If you don’t wish to answer my next question, then we shall end the conversation there. Kanata…are you a traveler from another world, like Kotone?”
I debated whether to answer for a moment, then nodded. There wasn’t a good reason to hide the fact anymore, and Garnet worked closely with Kotone. He would easily be able to tell that I was a traveler. The truth was the best choice.
“I thought so… Has Kotone told you about her hobby?” he asked, looking serious. I wondered if this was a conversation we needed to have right then, but I nodded.
“Yes, she has,” I said. “And that means you are aware as well.”
“Indeed. While it may be rude, I may have done some investigations into Kotone due to the nature of my position… When Kotone reduced her time working as an adventurer, I spoke to her about it. I also promised her that I would help her to spread her art throughout the world should she finish a work she was satisfied with.”
“That would have made her happy…”
Kotone’s dream was to bring manga to this world. With Garnet’s help it would have been easy to spread her books throughout Manaloch.
“I think that if nothing else, I can at least make Kotone’s dream come true,” said Garnet as he opened the large envelope on the table and pulled out a stack of papers.
“Is this…?”
“It’s Kotone’s. I’d given her access to a room in the Mithril Wand where she could focus on her work. This is everything I gathered from that room.”
Kotone said that if I wanted to read her manga, that I could…but I wasn’t certain it was right to just look without permission. Garnet lived in a world without manga. He didn’t really have the context to judge what she’d done or understand her emotional investment in it—but I had the feeling that Kotone was a bit embarrassed by her hobby.

I waffled, but eventually my desire to learn more about Kotone won. Feeling apologetic, I ran my eyes over the pages.
It was an action manga set in a Japanese-style world about an overpowered character fighting for justice.
“It’s good…” I said.
“Yes, yes, it is, isn’t it?” said Garnet with a happy nod. “Kotone didn’t seem satisfied with it, but I think it will become quite popular.”
I could understand why Kotone wasn’t satisfied though. The content and premise were run-of-the-mill, and someone like me could clearly recognize which works she’d drawn inspiration from. The drawings were far better than what an average person could do but weren’t as refined as a professional’s.
Even so, those weren’t huge negatives considering manga didn’t exist in Locklore.
“I am not certain what format this—what do you call it?—*manga* should be in. I still have a number of questions about that. Kanata, if you help, things will move a lot faster. I want to honor Kotone by selling books of her work,” said Garnet.
“I would be happy to help with that. Please, ask away,” I said. I also wanted Kotone’s dream to become reality.
“That would be wonderful, Kanata! This whole affair has left an atmosphere of gloom hanging over Manaloch. It will take some effort, but we can quickly mass produce it using copy magic. I would like to begin distributing it within the next few days. Though asking you for the details might be a burden, Kanata…”
“I don’t have anything urgent to do. I’m happy to help.”
“That’s wonderful to hear.” Garnet nodded happily, then brought a hand to his bearded chin. “By the way, there is part of the work that I didn’t really understand. It was included in the back of the documents. Would you mind taking a look?”
“Let’s see…”
Flipping through the pages, I realized I’d arrived at a different manga. I continued reading, realizing that I recognized the characters, and I felt my face stiffen.
It was…boy’s love fan fiction.
The characters were from manga back in Japan that Kotone had told me she liked. She hadn’t drawn this for other people to see—this was surely just shipping for her own enjoyment. There were no explanations or backgrounds given for the characters, and the drawings were all over the place in quality. Some she had clearly taken her time on, and others she hadn’t.
“That was all I could find of it, but I didn’t really…understand,” said Garnet. “There may be pages remaining in Kotone’s room that would help explai—”
“Burn them.”
“What?!”

“It’s what Kotone would have wanted.”
Garnet didn’t seem convinced.

—5—

IN THE DEEP OF NIGHT, two figures visited a research room in the Mithril Wand. A lich in her Impurity Sealing Robe and a noble mimic. Lunaère sighed as she stood over the bed of the girl with black bangs.
“You gonna heal her?” asked Noble, and Lunaère narrowed her eyes.
“I would feel bad leaving her. And…Kanata is sad.”
“You already healed the other two, but you’ve been puttin’ her off. Kinda makes me think you were planning on leaving her this way.”
“What do you think I am, Noble?” asked Lunaère.
“Jealous, mostly.”
Lunaère scowled, then slowly stretched out her fingers, held her arms up, and prepared a magic circle. Noble pulled in his tongue and shut his lid, making him look like a normal treasure chest. Lunaère sighed heavily and lowered her arms.
“I’m not a monster. Besides, I trust Kanata,” she said.
“Definitely. You might use a high-level spirit to eavesdrop, or you might attack his friends when you were stalking him, or run away instead of talking to him. But you’re definitely not a monster.”
“O-of course it sounds bad when you say it like that. I was just worried about Kanata, so I kept an eye on the situation.”
“Pretty sure most stalkers would say the same thing.” Noble rattled his lid in annoyance. “And that guy in black you talked to…he seems super suspicious. You sure you shoulda let him go?”
Lunaère had given Noble a brief explanation of what had happened at the Adventurer’s Guild, but Noble thought the whole thing smelled fishy. Lovis had said that he was close friends with Kanata. Yet Noble and Lunaère had been following Kanata for weeks and they’d never once seen Lovis. The bandit’s excuses had just been a little *too* good.
“Lovis is a good person…I think. He told me… He told me Kanata loved me,” said Lunaère, starting to blush.
“Yeah, but that doesn’t make him *good*.”
“You’re being stubborn. I used Yama Dharmaraja’s Eye of Truth too, and Lovis wasn’t lying.”
“Ehh, I guess.”
Lunaère turned back to Kotone and held her hand above the sleeping girl’s forehead.
“Death Magic Level 21: Anteros’s Salvation.”
A pink magic circle appeared above Kotone’s forehead.

The spell cleansed and organized a soul dirtied by death magic. Lunaère continued the spell for at least thirty seconds, then slowly pulled her arm back. The magic circle faded.
“That’s the last of it. She should wake in time as well,” she said.
“Always amazing, Lunaère. Takes you just a few seconds to heal what other people have already given up on,” said Noble.
“It’s actually quite difficult to return a broken psyche to its original state. It’s not something I want to do on a regular basis. It’s easier to break things than it is to fix them.” Lunaère seemed tired as she wiped the sweat from her brow.
“Let’s get outta here. Don’t want to get caught,” said Noble.
“Wait just a moment.”
Lunaère placed her hands on the bed’s rails and stared at Kotone. Then she brought her face close to Kotone’s ear and said, “I won’t forgive you if you ever touch Kanata.”
“What was that ’bout trusting Kanata?”
“I-It’s just in case. Just in case. Let’s hurry, Noble.”
As they made their way out side by side, her eyes narrowed in unease.
“These strange things continue to happen,” she said. “Just after a level 1000-class demon king appears, an ancient spirit is released from its imprisonment. These sorts of things don’t usually happen even once a millennium. And Kanata…if he’d made a single mistake, he would have been in real danger this time.”
“You think there’s something behind it all?”
“Is it my fault?” she asked with a severe expression. “It’s possible Kanata has been targeted because I raised his level so high. If this is how it was destined to turn out, Kanata should never have left Cocytus… Perhaps now I should take him back and lock him up there.”
“You don’t have to jump to that so fast… Besides, there’s no one stronger than you, right? Yeah, if anyone looks dangerous to Kanata, you can go beat the snot out of them first,” said Noble.
Lunaère stopped and blinked.
Noble added hastily, “I mean, you can’t *actually* do that.”
“Noble…that’s a good idea. I will consider it.”
“Seriously…?”

—6—

TWO DAYS LATER, Pomera, Philia, and I were walking through Manaloch on our way to see Garnet at the Mithril Wand.
“Why does this always happen to me?” groused Pomera, her shoulders slumped.
After the latest crisis, there were renewed cries throughout town that declared Pomera the hero of Manaloch.

She did, of course, go through the city, healing the injured. But tacked on to that achievement were tales that she chased off Lovis of the Black Reapers, repaired the Adventurer's Guild with her white magic, and killed Corpse Doll Alice with a single strike.
"Pomera's so cool! Wow!" Philia danced around in excitement.
"Thank you, Philia. But I'm not that happy…" said Pomera.
"Pomera-san, you healed a building?" I asked.
"Don't be dense, Kanata! It was…" said Pomera but she stopped there, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.
"What's wrong, Pomera-san?"
"*Nothing*. Just… Kanata, do you know someone? A really beautiful girl? Have you been keeping her secret from me?"
"Huh…?"
The sudden question caught me off guard. Pomera was the first friend I made after leaving Cocytus. Kotone and Rosemonde could both be considered beautiful, but Pomera had met them. She wasn't talking about that woman who traveled with Lovis, was she?
"What are you hiding from me, Kanata?" asked Pomera, her face suddenly coming close to mine.
"Uh, I'm not trying to—"
"Pomera's scary now!" whispered Philia.
"She had white hair. The tips were a little bit red. And she had different-colored eyes…" said Pomera.
"That's Lunaère! That means she's still in Manaloch!"
Last time I met her was when I defeated Mother, and I thought Lunaère had gone back to Cocytus after that. It was fantastic news that she was still in Manaloch. I hadn't expected Pomera and Lunaère to run into each other.
"Lunaère…? Isn't that your magic teacher and the person you owe your life to?" asked Pomera.
"Yeah, I told you about her. So you met Lunaère—what'd you talk about?" I asked, and Pomera's expression immediately clouded over. It felt like I'd blundered into a trap.
"Kanata… You said that Lunaère was an old lady in her eighties, right?"
"Oh, huh, I don't…" I raced back through my memories.
I *did* say that.
In my defense, I almost said Lunaère was a thousand years old, but then thought I shouldn't reveal the fact that she was a lich. Eighty was a compromise.
"Yeah. I did say that…" I said.
"I know you said that! Why did you lie to me?! Confess!"
"I-I'm sorry, but it's difficult to explain. I have a reason… B-but is it really something to be that angry about?"
"I'm not angry! I'm just asking questions! Confess!"
"R-right now…?"
"What's wrong?! Going to tell me more lies?!"

She was definitely angry. I looked at Philia for help, but she was clapping her hands in amusement.
“Kanata, Pomera, Philia, thank you for coming. I saw you on your way and came out to meet you,” Garnet called to us. Pomera’s face turned red. She looked embarrassed and took a step back from me.
“I-I’m sorry, Kanata… I got a little worked up,” she said.
I bowed my head slightly to Garnet, partially in greeting, partially to say thank you for saving me just now. He gave a tiny thumbs-up and smiled.
“I have everything you requested earlier. Shall I have it all delivered to your lodging later?” asked Garnet.
“I appreciate the offer, but I can store it using spacetime magic. I’ll take it now,” I replied. Now that the cat was out of the bag concerning my level, there wasn’t much point in trying to keep a low profile with Garnet.
Now I could start mass producing the Blood Ethers and get back to leveling Pomera in the Cursed Mirror.
“And also, regarding the sap of the spirit tree… We’ve completed our quality inspection. In that incredible volume, we can’t possibly sell it all at once. It would crash the market. But I believe with some time, the quantity you gave me before will eventually bring you two hundred million gold,” said Garnet in a low voice.
“T-two hundred million?!” I cried, and the people passing nearby looked at me in surprise. I quickly lowered my voice and said, “S-sorry about that…”
If we got that much, it would essentially solve all our money issues. I really needed to thank Wolzottl. Next time I called him, I’d make sure to have a nice steak on hand.
“Also, about Kotone’s manga, which you helped me with—we’ve begun circulating it through Manaloch,” continued Garnet.
“A-already?!”
“Yes. This is just as a trial run, but both of her works should be in circulation now. They’ve been well received by those working on the project, and I expect they will explode in popularity. This would have been impossible without your help, Kanata. Please let me thank you again.”
Garnet operated incredibly fast. He wanted to brighten up the mood in Manaloch after back-to-back disasters, but I never imagined he could get a final product and start distributing it this quickly.
“I really didn’t do that much. Thank you for making Kotone’s dream come true,” I said.
“No need to thank me. I’m sure Kotone will be glad as well.”
Garnet smiled in what seemed to be genuine happiness. I was glad I’d helped him. Then my eyes widened.
“Hang on… *Both* her works? Wasn’t it just the one?” I asked.
“You remember that short one about the boys’ friendship? I did think it was somewhat…eccentric. Unfinished and a little inconsistent. But oddly enough, it was received very favorably by a portion of my staff. They insisted we publish it.”

I covered my face with my hands. Kotone almost certainly made that one for her own enjoyment and didn't want it shown in public. Besides, it was a fanfic that had no context in Locklore.
"Sh-should I not have done that?" asked Garnet, crestfallen.
"…No, I don't think you should have."
That's when I heard hurried footsteps approaching.
I saw neat black bangs, a slender body, and familiar metal gauntlets. There was no doubt about it, it was Kotone. But her normally cool, expressionless face was bright red, and tears filled her eyes.
"Kotone-san, you're awake!" I cried, tears naturally welling in my eyes as well.
Kotone glared at Garnet and drew back a gauntlet-clad hand for a powerful punch.
I felt the blood drain from my face. A serious strike from an S-rank adventurer like Kotone wouldn't leave a trace of Garnet behind.
I stepped between them and grabbed Kotone's hand.
"C-calm down, Kotone-san! What's wrong?! Are you still being affected by Puppet—!"
Kotone used her other arm to put me in a headlock.
"K-Kanata! This is your fault too! I told you I wanted to keep it secret! And why did you have to publish…*that*?! You of all people should have understood what *that* was when you saw it!" she shouted.
So, it was about the manga. I should have at least tried to slow Garnet down. Actually, I should have destroyed the boy's love manga on the spot.
"I'm sorry, Kotone-san! I'm so sorry!" I cried.
"Apologies mean nothing now! I didn't want anyone to know about *that*! I'll kill you both and then follow you to hell!"
"I'm really sorry!"
Fat tears fell from Kotone's eyes as she squeezed my neck with greater force.
"P-please stop, Kotone! I-It was my fault! Forgive Kanata!" Garnet cried.
"Please stop, Kotone! Let Kanata go! I-I don't really know what's wrong, but we can talk it out!" added Pomera.
Garnet and Pomera desperately latched on to Kotone and peeled her off me.

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It seemed that Gallan and Barrot had woken as well. The magic user responsible for their care couldn't explain their miraculous recoveries. I was just happy that Kotone was back to her old self.
The next day, every copy of Kotone's boy's love manga was retrieved and destroyed. Her main manga went on to become a huge hit in Manaloch.
I hoped she would be happy. But no matter how many times Garnet and I went to see her, she stayed locked up in her room for the next week and refused to come out.

—7—

“COME ON! Just kill him already! You don’t have to make him a puppet—just finish him!”

Naiarotop was watching Kanata and Alice from the Upper Realm through a dimensional window. They bit the fingers of their left hand while watching with rapt attention.

Finally, Kanata was pushed to the brink. With Alice’s level and abilities, she should be able to defeat Kanata given how much he’d been weakened.

“That puny guy is coming at you! Kill him, kill him! Killhimkillhimkillhim!” screamed Naiarotop in frustration as Bennet turned his sword toward Alice.

Naiarotop had done quite a few questionable things to bring this plan together. If this failed, they would be out of ideas.

They’d set Alice up to be Kanata’s demise, but now she was having second thoughts. Instead of killing him, she wanted Kanata for a puppet.

“You don’t have to do that! Just hurry up and finish him! I’ll give you something to replace the Red Staff later—just kill him now!”

Naiarotop brought their face closer to the dimensional window. If this failed, Naiarotop’s master might give up on them.

“Please, Alice!” they begged. “Kill him now! If you want the power of an Unseen Hand of the Gods, I’ll give it to you later!”

Then Pomera whacked Alice in the back of the skull and sent the lich crumpling to the ground. Naiarotop tore at their green hair and collapsed on the floor.

They groaned, then turned to lie on their back and let out a heavy sigh.

“Why…? Why did this have to happen…?”

As they lay there, Pomera began casting healing spell after healing spell on Kanata, restoring his HP. It had all been for naught.

“My subject. It seems you have done something truly outrageous,” came the voice of Naiarotop’s master. Naiarotop continued to lie there without replying. They normally responded to their master’s call immediately, but the issue with Kanata had worsened their relationship to the point that Naiarotop simply stared at the ceiling with lifeless eyes.

“I-Is this thing on? Can you hear me? It has yet to be made into a Memory Sphere, but a number of our Higher God clients were in an uproar when they saw the live stream. Once the Memory Sphere is made public, Locklore’s continued existence will be endangered.”

“Eh. Who cares?” Naiarotop finally replied. “Besides, you’ll just get made fun of again. I bet all the gods watching were overjoyed when Kanata Kanbara won. Why don’t you set aside your pride already and accept the truth? You gave me an impossible task, and I’ve got no other plays left. I did everything I could. If this is a failure, then it’s your failure.”

“In this one instance…your failure is for the best. Since we’re speaking frankly, it is a good thing you failed to kill him. How could you make such an egregious mistake? I should be thanking Kanata Kanbara for helping us avoid the worst possible outcome.”
“Wh-what?! Is that some kind of jab?! What exactly did I do that could be considered such a horrible failure?” shouted Naiarotop in anger. They sat up and glared upward.
Despite all the restrictions on Naiarotop, they had managed to push Kanata to the brink of destruction. They had done absolutely everything they could within the limits of their boss’s extreme restrictions. Obviously, they failed to seal the deal, but enduring this sort of verbal abuse drained them of any desire to get the job done.
“Sigh…” said their boss.
“Well don’t just *say* ‘sigh’ and nothing else! Explain to me what exactly I did wrong!”
“How about ‘Return to Nothing,’” said Naiarotop’s master shortly, and the junior god jumped in surprise. “You used magic to interfere directly, *you fool*. Did I not tell you that was absolutely forbidden?”
“U-urgh, uhhhh… But that was…it was…”
Naiarotop cradled their head in their hands. Return to Nothing was the spell Naiarotop had “unintentionally” used against Kanata when he looked like he was going to easily avoid their final surprise. Naiarotop had been forced to tweak the scenario.
“My finger slipped! L-Listen…if he wasn’t killed then, it would’ve all been for nothing. Y-you can’t just pick and choose how I do things, you told me to make it work…” Naiarotop muttered any excuse that came to mind. Tears slowly filled their eyes. “Oh yes, that’s it! Just edit the Memory Sphere so it isn’t that easy to spot…”
“It has already been seen in the livestream. Besides, there would be no way to hide how unnaturally Kanata Kanbara’s spell suddenly cut out. You know how the fandom picks this stuff apart on Gospl. It would backfire and cause an even greater scandal.”
Naiarotop was at a loss for words and simply opened and closed their mouth weakly.
“Have I not told you many times? If we interfere directly, it will become a world where anything goes. Its current format is unique among the higher gods. If we set a precedent for interfering, they will lose interest. If they lose interest, Locklore ceases to exist. If Locklore ceases to exist, *you* cease to exist.”
“U-urgh, ugh…”
“That is what I mean when I say it is good that Kanata Kanbara survived. If he had died then, it would have meant your interference had a significant impact on the world. As is, we escaped with only minor damage. However, that does not change the fact that you used a level 26 spell against a person in Locklore. Locklore will carry that blemish for the rest of its existence. Do

you understand the damage you have done? What could have prompted you to do something so careless?”
“It’s because I wanted to kill him! If I went through all that trouble and it still didn’t work, I’d be out of options!”
“’Went through all that trouble’, hm…? Let me be clear, your most recent plan was horrific. It’s one thing for a demon king to randomly get their hands on a powerful item. But you gave direct orders to the person responsible for carrying out the deed. Alice, was it not? That is obvious divine intervention. Even Locklore natives have noticed! I am certain the other gods watching Locklore have seen it too. Alice revealed everything! We have no hope of hiding it now.”
“Of course I knew that when I did it! But if I didn’t do it, I couldn’t get rid of him! You should know that too! You’re always looking down on me, telling me to do this and that! If I say it’s not possible, it’s your job to tell me another way!” shouted Naiarotop, the pressure of their emotions boiling over. “If you believe I can’t do the job, then just eliminate me and make a better subject! You’re being an idiot!”
Once Naiarotop flung out one insult, they just kept coming.
“In truth, this failure was so over-the-top that I *did* consider eliminating you. Though, that is a different conversation from whether or not I believe any of my *other* subjects are capable of taking care of Kanata Kanbara.”
“Uh, oh…” Naiarotop’s face paled upon hearing their own elimination had been considered. This conversation had taken a sudden turn for the worse.
“Your direct interference was horrific. But after serious deliberation, I have decided to allow your continued existence,” said the master.
Naiarotop let out a heavy sigh of relief. They sank weakly to their knees and said, “R-right, of course. I didn’t think you’d actually eliminate me…”
“I am increasing your authority in regard to Locklore. Your attempts to circumvent restrictions have only led to disaster, so perhaps their removal may actually make things cleaner.”
Naiarotop’s expression changed immediately. “M-Master! Are you certain?”
“Yes. I had previously banned you from direct methods of interference, such as the Red Staff of Authority incident, but I will allow such actions in the future. However, direct interference using magic is strictly forbidden. You may also send direct messages to the Unseen Hands of the Gods.”
An evil smile appeared on Naiarotop’s face.
“Understood! With this level of authority, I should be able to find a way to kill Kanata Kanbara! Now the path is clear, Master!”
“However, your enemy is not only Kanata Kanbara. You must also kill or drive the lich Lunaère back into the depths of the dungeon Cocytus. She is gaining interest in the outside world and may yet become the source of many problems.”
“Yes, I understand, Master. However, I have already thought of a solution for her. Lunaère, or whatever her name was, will become emotionally unstable once Kanata Kanbara is dead. It shouldn’t be difficult to force her

back into Cocytus—she is powerful but mentally fragile. A strong wind could break her spirit. And, unlike travelers, the other gods pay her less attention. I will take care of her; I am confident of that."
Naiarotop stood and spread their hands as they spoke.
"Finally, I see your true nature returning, my subject. I expect much of you."
Naiarotop put a finger to their chin, a wrinkle between their eyebrows.
"But why did you speak so harshly to me just before you increased my authority? I am grateful, but won't the gods react poorly to that?" they asked.
"Ah, I have already woven that in as well. I have already announced your name to the other gods and presented you as Kanata Kanbara's new archenemy."
"Whaaaat?!" Naiarotop shrieked loudly at their master's absurd statement.
"I-I'm sorry… What does that even mean, Master?! Kanata Kanbara's archenemy… Why do I have to fight against a pathetic human like we're equals?! This whole thing is just a setup for me to take a fall?!"
"Responsibility rolls downhill, my subject."
"So, that's what this is all about! You're running from your responsibility and pushing it all onto me! That's your ulterior motive, isn't it?! Th-this is terrible! I was supposed to become a Higher God someday, but now my reputation will be ruined for all eternity! How could you force your own subject into the role of a basic villain?! You're the one in charge! How can you so calmly tell me to do something so ridiculous?!"
"Locklore has begun to move too far from its original premise—there is no precedent for this, and there will likely be many disappointed gods. In order to have the gods accept your direct magical interference, I had no other choice but to publicly announce your opposition to Kanata Kanbara and drop it into the backstory."
"That's absurd! Please think of what you're doing to *me*! Can't you please just reconsider?!"
"Can I? As I explained before, this is not about something as trivial as your poor reputation or whose responsibility it is. This is about the continued existence of Locklore. My only other possible action is to eliminate you and apologize to the other gods. If you wish to escape this with as little damage to your name as possible, you must take care of Kanata Kanbara immediately. I suspect this may help you recover your reputation."
"Pleeease don't make me a spin-off!" cried Naiarotop weakly. But by that point, their master's presence had already vanished. Naiarotop was part of the entertainment now.
"Why me? Why me?" Naiarotop stood weakly and looked toward the dimensional tear. Kanata was rushing around the area looking for Kotone.
"If something happens to Kotone-san, Naiarotop, then I…I won't let you get away with it!" said Kanata to himself. That broke the dam holding back

Naiarotop’s rage. Racked with fury, their humanoid form crumbled, and they morphed into something otherworldly.
“You pathetic human filth! Kanata Kanbara! Look how you’ve damaged my honor! I will drive you to the depths of suffering and despair! Then I will kill you!”

Bonus Story:
The Lich and the Beast of Death

—1—

A FEW DAYS AFTER the attack on Manaloch, Kanata, Pomera, and Philia went to the forest outside of town and summoned the spirit Wolzottl to play with him.

“Woof, woof, woof!”

Wol lay on his back while Kanata rubbed his belly. The giant dog yipped like he was ticklish but also rolled around like he was enjoying it.

Spirits responded to summons from humans, but normally, they wanted some sort of transaction in return. There were some spirits who were simply interested in human company, but the majority needed some sort of equal exchange. If you took their help without satisfying their demands, they would nullify the contract.

The payment Wol wanted was affection. It wasn’t something they could do in town, but Kanata went deep into the forest where no one would see so he could play with the dog spirit and pay him back for all he’d done. Despite his fearsome appearance, Wol was just a big, powerful, lonely puppy.

“Kanata…aren’t you afraid?” asked Pomera.

She and Philia were watching from a little ways off. Philia was hiding behind Pomera and gripping the white mage’s robes in unease.

“I’ve always liked animals. I used to have a cat, and when I was young, I used to play with my grandpa’s dog all the time,” said Kanata.

“Th-that’s not really what I meant.”

“They obviously like having their bellies and heads rubbed, and scratches at the base of their ears, but they also really enjoy having their chins or their hips and shoulders scratched. Their muscles can get stiff easily, so the trick is to rub pretty hard to release the tension. There are some who don’t like that though, so you just have to watch how they react,” continued Kanata absently as he petted Wol.

“Woof!” Wolzottl stretched out his neck happily, and Kanata scratched under his chin.

“Awooo…waah…” the spirit opened his mouth wide and let out a big yawn that showcased all his shining teeth. When Philia saw that, she leapt out from behind Pomera and dashed toward Wol.

“D-don’t eat Kanata! Philia won’t ever forgive you!” she shouted.

Wol looked at Philia with a puzzled tilt of his head. Philia jumped when their eyes met, but he held his gaze firmly and she raised her fists.

“Ph-Philia, that’s dangerous! Philia and I should really stay farther away, Kanata. I’m not sure it’s safe…” said Pomera as she tugged on Philia’s hand.

Philia's mouth turned down into a frown, and she continued to glare at Wol. His twin tails raised and started to swing back and forth. The way she was acting seemed to make him wonder if she was going to play with him as well.
"Oh… W-wait, Wol. Calm down," said Kanata when he saw how Wolzottl's tails were wagging. The dog spirit had a habit of jumping up when he got too excited. If he were a normal dog it might be cute, but he was a level 2,000 nature spirit that stood over ten feet high. His playing could easily prove fatal for most people in Locklore.
"Awoo!" Wolzottl leapt up and rushed toward Philia. He'd desperately hoped one of the girls would decide to play with him, and now one of them was! This was turning out to be a fantastic day.
Philia jumped in surprise and let out a squeak just before Wol tackled her to the ground in a puff of dust.
"Philia?!" screamed Pomera as Kanata rushed to chase after Wolzottl.
Wol was sitting on top of Philia, licking her face.
"Woof, woof, awoo!"
"Aaah! Kanata, K-Kanata, help! It's eating Philia!" shrieked Philia as she waved her arms in shock, unable to escape from the spirit as he drooled on her face.
"Wol, stop it! Philia's scared!" called Kanata.
"Unnn…" whined Wol as Kanata managed to pull the dog away.
"Ph-Philia! Philia, are you okay?! Stay with me! Was your soul eaten?!" cried Pomera as she hugged Philia to her.
Kanata thought she was being a bit dramatic, but Wolzottl's tongue did actually have the power to draw mana from others.
"Ugh… So sticky…" moaned Philia. "Philia thought she would be lunch…"
Even though she'd been pinned down and licked by Wolzottl, Philia wasn't called the God of Terror in ancient times for nothing.
Kanata was relieved that Philia was all right, but he also secretly hoped she would eventually overcome her fear of dogs and become friends with Wolzottl. A person needed to be around level 2,000 in order to withstand Wolzottl's version of playing, and there weren't too many people like that in the world.
Suddenly, Kanata looked up at the sky.
"What's wrong, Kanata?" asked Pomera.
"I just felt like someone was watching me… It was probably just my imagination," said Kanata, but he bit his lip. It felt the same as when he'd faced the Red King's self-destruct sequence. He was certain someone was watching him just now, and one name weighed heavy on his mind: Naiarotop.

MEANWHILE, Lunaère sat on the tall city walls of Manaloch. Her beautiful white hair peeked out from her black robe.
In her hand was a glowing yellow crystal, and inside that was an image of Kanata playing with Wolzottl.
“That dog spirit is adorable… I’m so happy Kanata seems to be enjoying himself,” said Lunaère with a smile as she covered her mouth with her fingertips.
“Lunaère, I thought you were gonna stop spying,” said Noble peevishly.
“Wh-what are you talking about? I’m only… Bad things keep happening around Kanata, I was worried…and so I was just checking how he’s doing! This is *not* spying.”
“Definitely looks like spying.”
“B-besides, you said I should stop using Medjedross to keep surveillance on him. And you were right, using that spirit to watch over Kanata was bad. I have mended my ways,” she said with a smug look. “This crystal is different. It isn’t a spirit.”
“Wha… No! That’s not it! It wasn’t the *spirit* that made spying bad,” replied Noble.
“Spirits are supernatural beings, many of them with access to strange powers. I understand now that using them to watch Kanata when he’s in private settings is not a good thing.”
“That goes without saying. But that’s not what I was—”
“While this crystal can be *adjusted* with magic, it’s really only capable of normal scrying. It might be a slightly high performance crystal that I’ve spent some time fine-tuning, but crystals for far viewing are sold in Manaloch’s shops. This is completely normal. I can’t observe him twenty-four hours a day, and I can’t view inside rooms. You could say this is within reasonable limits… Yes, it’s just as if I were walking through the forest.”
“That just means you went from being an effective stalker to a lousy stalker!” shouted Noble angrily, causing Lunaère to jump. “How come you get like this about Kanata? There were signs when we lived with Kanata in Cocytus, but you were never this bad back then…”
Lunaère frowned but couldn’t come up with a quick comeback.
“B-but it’s obvious that someone *is* after Kanata,” she said. “There is no other explanation for all these dangerous events occurring near him. It’s possible that I raised his level too high and now he’s caught the attention of some great being. If that’s the case, I must protect him. Are you saying I should just let Kanata die?!”
“O-of course not, but…”
Lunaère sighed. “Are you done, Noble? It’s not like I came after Kanata just because I wanted to spy on him. Don’t randomly make assumptions about me.”
“S-sorry… Wait, but what about your past…?” For a moment, Noble twisted his tongue in discomfort, but then he quickly drew it back in his mouth. He

had almost fallen into her rhetorical trap. “Lunaère, if all that was true, shouldn’t you just go talk directly to Kanata?! I told you to stop chasing him around in secret! That was close—you almost had me fooled!”
“I-I would talk to him if I could! But I told him I was going back to Cocytus! And what am I supposed to say to that half-elf girl if I meet her again?!”
“You are impossible!” Noble let out a heavy sigh.
“And…when I think of that half-elf girl being with Kanata all the time…it makes me upset. She’s gotten to know Kanata in a way I haven’t. He’s caring for her when I can’t see. They’re becoming closer, and thinking about that… And even if it became the three of us—Kanata, the girl, and me—all I can think is that I would be there and not know what to say as the two of them had fun conversations… I don’t know what I’d do if I had to interact with that girl all the time.”
Lunaère’s hands shook just thinking about it.
“Just a pessimistic loner…”
“Well, what do you expect! I spent a thousand years in Cocytus so I wouldn’t meet anyone!”
“Fine, I get it. I won’t push you, so do whatever you want.”
Noble collapsed on the top of the wall like he was too tired to deal with it anymore. He opened his mouth and let drool dribble out.
“Anyway…Kanata’s dog spirit was so cute. I wanted to try petting him as well. I do have the unholy impurity, so I wouldn’t be able to pet him too much, though—even if it’s being suppressed by my robe.”
“Cute…? He looked pretty dangerous to me. Guess all the spirits you have contracts with are more creepy in comparison, though.”
Lunaère raised her head, looking like she’d just had a great idea.
“That’s it! I’ll make a contract with Kanata’s spirit!” she said.
“Huh?”
“If I do that, I can have the spirit keep an eye on Kanata! I could even nudge Kanata in certain directions using the spirit!”
“That’s exactly the kind of thing a stalker would do! I thought you just said you weren’t going to use spirits to spy on him anymore!”
“I-I would just happen to coincidentally make a contract with the same spirit as Kanata. It’s not spying. It’s just like asking a mutual friend how things are going with him. That’s what normal people do. My primary goal is to spoil that cute dog spirit, anyway!”
Noble let out another heavy sigh. What about this was coincidental? What about this was *normal*? Sure, it was normal to ask a friend how another friend was doing, but it was *not* normal to make a friend specifically for the purpose of asking about a person you loved but refused to talk to. That was just being weird.
“You look like you have something to say, Noble.”
“Yeah, I think… You know what? Nah. You just do whatever you want.”
Lunaère quickly decided to buy the items in Manaloch that she would need to summon Kanata’s spirit.

***

Kanata used the Four Gates Ceremony when he first summoned Wolzottl. He'd offered four items which the spirit would take, and in return, it agreed to negotiate a permanent contract.

Only small changes in the items offered or the conditions of the summoning could mean she ended up summoning a completely different spirit—it was difficult to determine in advance what spirit would answer this ceremony's call until she actually did it. This would be tricky.

Lunaère spent a day going around Manaloch buying the necessary items. The next day, she went deep into the forest to where Kanata had summoned Wolzottl and arranged the four items to prepare for the Four Gates Ceremony.

"I couldn't prepare the exact same items that Kanata used, so it seems I will have to make some adjustments with my mana. This was about how it was, wasn't it?" she said.

She created a magic circle, placed her hand in the middle, and poured mana into it.

"Spirit who resides within the earth, lend your strength to this child of man."

The light from the magic circle grew in response to Lunaère's call. The four items used for the Four Gates Ceremony disappeared into the light, and a spirit in the form of a large blue dog appeared in front of Lunaère. This was without a doubt the spirit that Kanata had summoned: Wolzottl.

"It's s'posed to be tough to reproduce the same results, but you got it right. We can still count on your magic skills, at least," said Noble.

"The 'at least' isn't necessary, Noble," replied Lunaère.

"Not based on how you've been acting lately…"

Even if she'd used the Four Gates Ceremony to call the desired spirit, that didn't mean the summoning contract was complete. It only meant the spirit came to negotiate. The next step was to get him to accept her. Hopefully he wouldn't be stubborn.

Lunaère wasn't worried about that. She had watched Kanata enter a contract with Wolzottl, and she was aware of Wol's people-loving personality. The spirit quickly accepted Kanata just because he could handle Wolzottl's playful nature.

Wolzottl opened his golden eyes. He saw Lunaère in front of him, and his two tails started wagging in excitement. His attitude made Lunaère smile slightly. She took a step back and faced Wolzottl.

"Noble, stand back. Mr. Spirit, whenever you're ready," she said.

"Awooo!"

Wol howled and rushed at Lunaère. She raised her right hand and gently pressed two fingers to his forehead as he lunged. He stopped in his tracks.

"Uun?"

He tried to raise his head, but it wouldn’t budge. Those two fingers were completely restricting his movement, but Wolzottl didn’t understand why. He’d worked so hard and spent so long searching for a human that could befriend him, but he was never able to find one. Then he finally met Kanata. Kanata could keep up with him during play even if he let himself go a bit crazy. He was overjoyed and entered into a contract.
But Wolzottl could never have fathomed that there was a human who could handle him as easily as a puppy.
The force of Wolzottl’s tackle pushed the hood of Lunaère’s black robe back, revealing her face. Her bicolor emerald-and-crimson eyes looked at him, and she smiled as her unholy impurity started to leak out.
While only a tiny portion of her unholy impurity was released, Wolzottl was a spirit with a nose for mana and auras. Too late, he understood exactly what he’d leapt at.
“You seem energetic,” said Lunaère, her eyes crinkling in a smile. “Sit.”
“Uun…woof…” Wolzottl sat sadly where he was.
“Good boy.”
Lunaère stared at Wol’s neck and gently grabbed him and turned his face toward hers. Wolzottl’s body stiffened in surprise.
“Hee hee, touching him like this, it almost gives the illusion that Kanata’s warmth is still here. Of course that’s not possible, since it’s already been a day since Kanata touched him. I’m just a bit jealous of Wolzottl, even if he is a spirit,” she said.
“Don’t say things like that. It’s creepy,” said Noble.
Lunaère thought about Kanata playing with Wolzottl the day before, and her expression turned to absentminded joy as she squeezed her hands in Wol’s fur. It felt nice to touch him—but when she thought about how Kanata hugged Wol, she couldn’t help thinking of how it felt when Kanata had hugged her in Cocytus. Because of her unholy impurity, Lunaère had only intended to lightly stroke his fur, but soon her fingers rubbed feverishly around Wol’s neck.
As she did, the big dog shrank back and trembled.
A person of unknown identity—who was far more powerful than him and dripping with unholy impurity—was forcefully gripping his neck while looking ecstatic. He had no idea how this had happened, or why this girl in front of him had summoned him, or why she was grabbing on to his neck. But he knew he felt threatened. All living beings had an instinctual aversion to unholy impurity. It was lessened somewhat thanks to the Impurity Sealing Robe, but with the hood down, it was still overpowering.
His neck started to feel hot where she’d touched him, and that heat came with feelings of despair, sorrow, and suffering.
Instinct told him that if he made a wrong move, he could die in an instant. Wolzottl sat stiff and trembling, doing his best to endure the terror.
“Hey, Lunaère! You’re scaring him!” called Noble.

“Hm…? Oh, ah! He should have some resistance because he’s a spirit, but I suppose he isn’t that high level,” said Lunaère as she hurriedly withdrew her hand and pulled her hood back up.
Wolzottl seized the opportunity and was suddenly surrounded in pale light that quickly turned translucent.
“Huh? No! W-wait! Come back! I want to ask you something! It’s very important!” shouted Lunaère as she quickly tried to grab him, but her hand passed through him as he disappeared.
“He’s outta here. Not surprising,” said Noble.
“I-I’ll gather the items and summon him again, and then I’ll convince him to stay.”
“I doubt he’ll respond to the Four Gates Ceremony again.”
“Then it will take some effort, but my only choice is to forcefully summon him using the Cursed Binding Method… It’s not a method I’d *like* to use on someone who I wish to become friends with, but…”
“Just give it a rest.”
“B-but that spirit misunderstood me based on just one interaction!”
“Was it really that much of a misunderstanding?”
“If I leave things as they are, that dog might tell Kanata unpleasant things about what happened. I have to prevent that at all costs!”
“Ugh! Just let it go already!”
And so, Lunaère’s *Hug Wolzottl Strategy* ended in failure.

—3—

“LOOK, PHILIA-CHAN. It’s all right, I’ve got hold of him,” said Kanata.
“Yip!”
The day after Lunaère’s *Hug Wolzottl Strategy* failed, Kanata again summoned Wol deep within the forest.
Philia had said that Wol was scary but she wanted to get along with him, so Kanata decided to help. Kanata prepared by holding back the spirit so Philia could stroke his shoulder.
Philia closed her eyes and forced herself to reach out her hand. Her fingertips touched Wolzottl’s fur.
“Philia-chan, you touched him!” said Kanata.
“Y-yeah! Philia touched a dog!” she cried in joy. Wol looked back at Philia with happiness, like it was a miracle.
“Good job, Philia-chan. Look, Pomera-san, Philia-chan got over her fear. Do you want to try?” asked Kanata.
“I’m not exactly afraid of dogs, so that’s not the problem…” replied Pomera.
Just then, Kanata felt a strange presence and raised his head. Someone was watching him again.
“Naiarotop…?” he murmured.
“What’s wrong, Kanata?” asked Pomera.

“Hmm… It’s nothing.” Kanata forced away his concerned expression. Naiarotop’s interference wasn’t something he could come up with a countermeasure for. And so far, they seemed very unwilling to interfere directly. Telling Pomera about it wouldn’t do much more than scare her for no good reason.
“Uuun…” Wolzottl sat, his body trembling.
“W-Wol? What’s wrong? Wol!” cried Kanata.
With his delicate senses for mana and unholy impurity, Wol realized that the presence was the same as the girl who’d summoned him the day before.

Afterword

HELLO THERE, this is your author speaking. Thank you so much for buying Volume 3 of *The Disciple of the Lich*!

As I write this afterword, the cover isn't complete yet. But I'm certain that it will have Kanata, Wol, and Kotone on it. That makes me happy because they are some of my favorite characters in *The Disciple of the Lich*!

I mean…they *will be* on the cover, right?

I don't know what I'd do if I wrote this and then plans changed and Lovis, Yozakura, and Damia ended up plastered across the cover.

Anyway, the first volume of the manga version of *The Disciple of the Lich* will go on sale on February 25, 2021! That means it will probably be going on sale around when all of you are getting Volume 3 of the light novel! Lunaère is drawn so cutely in the manga version. I'd be grateful if you supported the manga as well! A portion is available for free on OVERLAP's manga website *Co mic Gardo*! Take a look!

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